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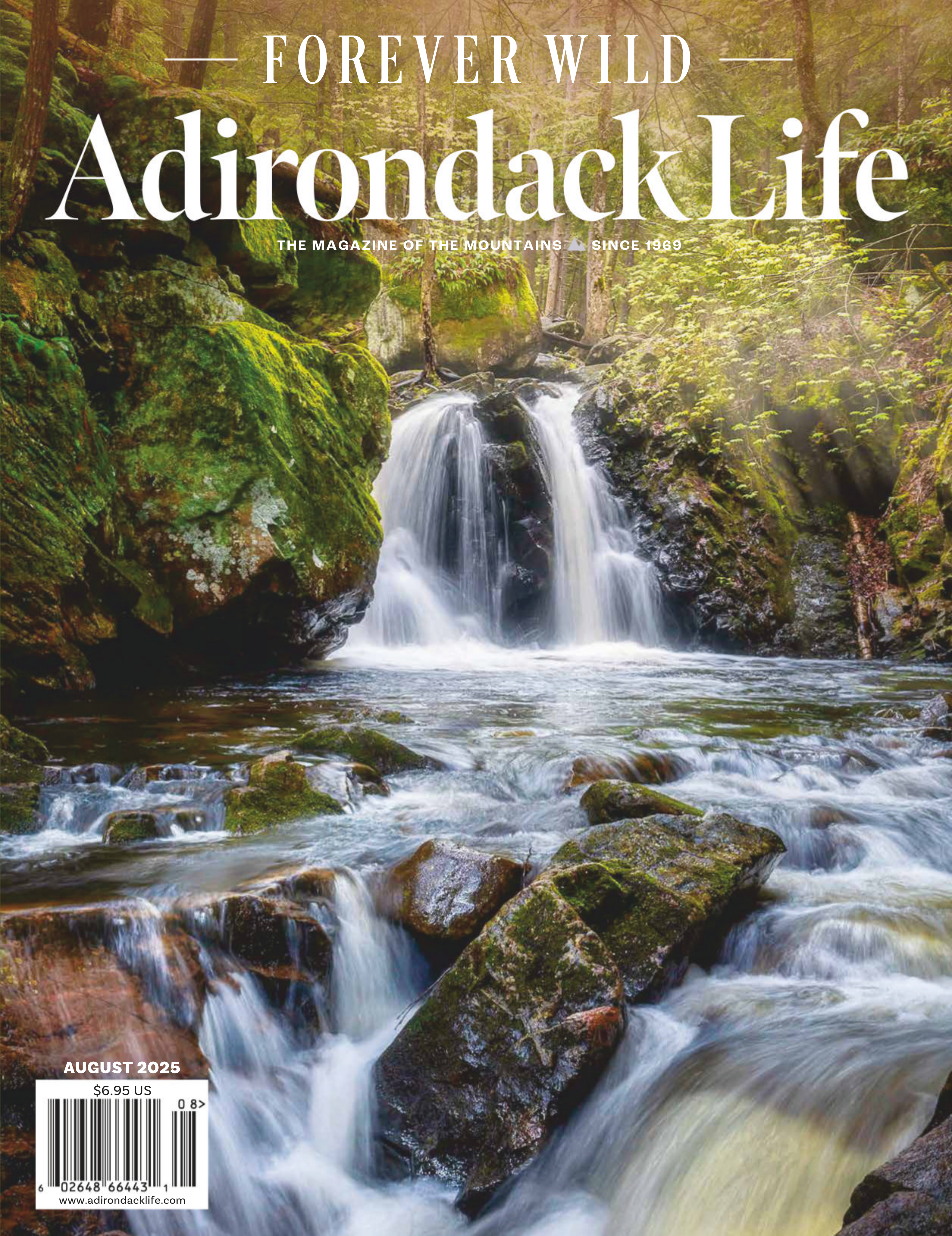

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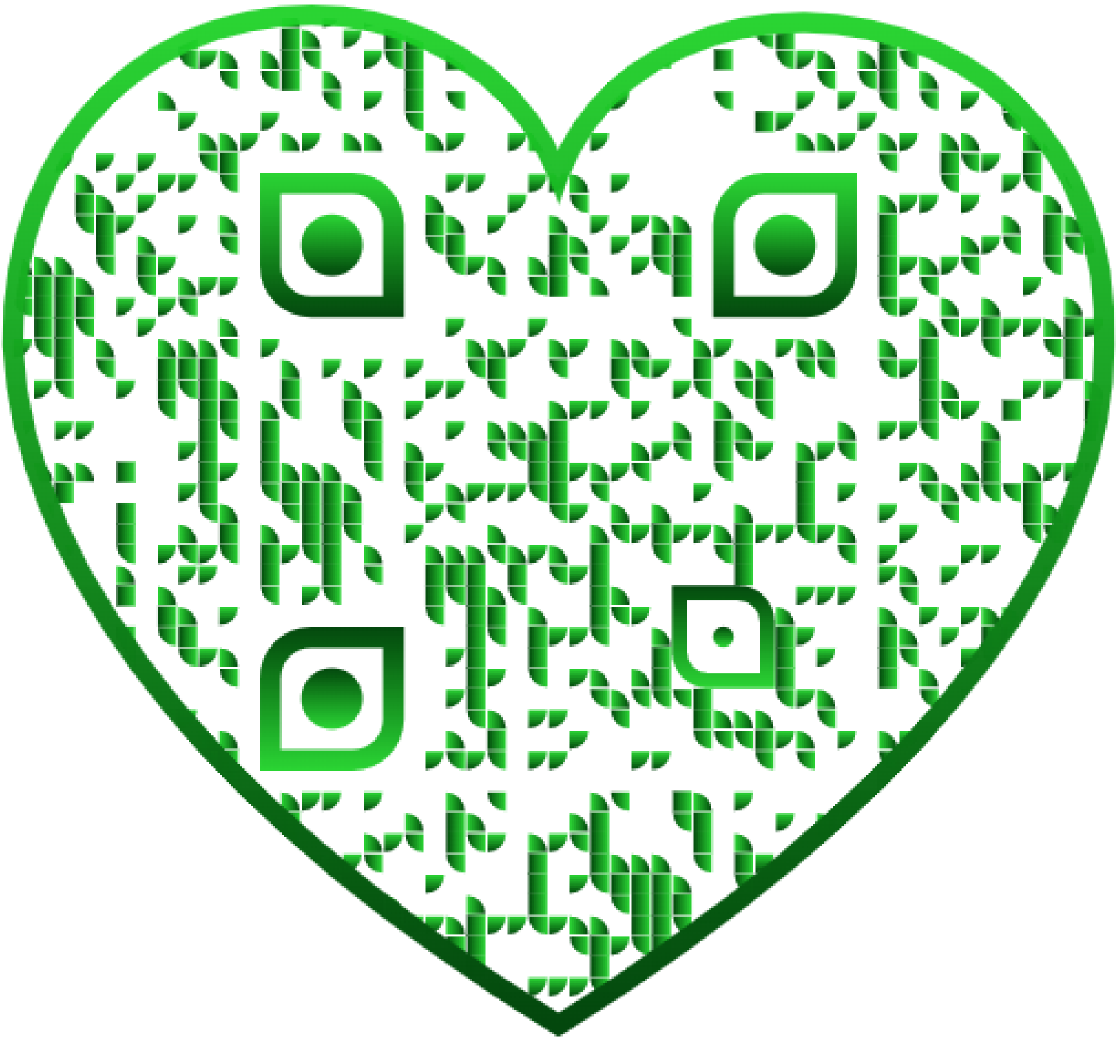

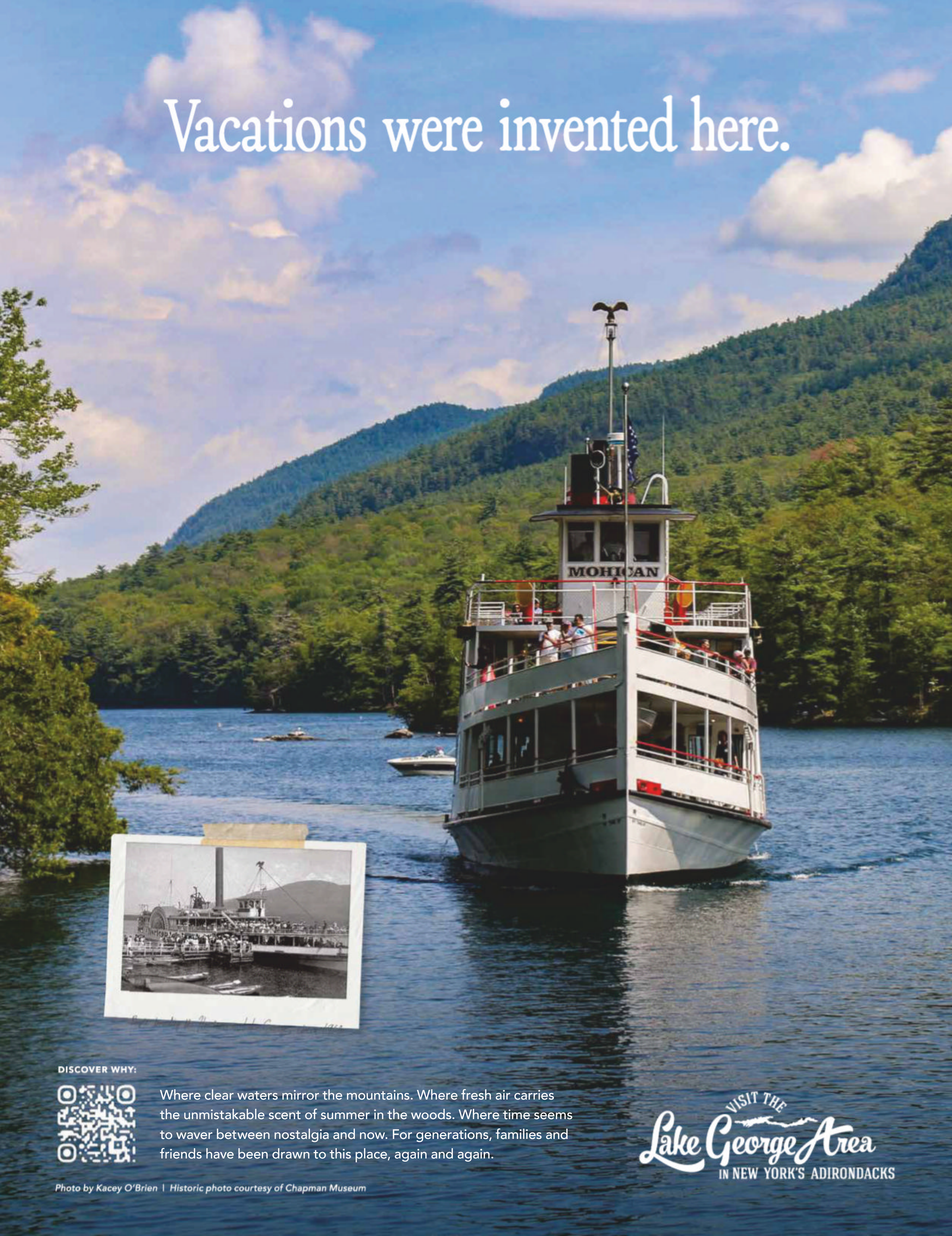
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HITTING A TRIPLE

Congratulations on the wonderful trifecta in the June 2025 *Adirondack Life* that featured two marvelous biographies of the gregarious and talented Frank Owen ("Character Study") and the tenacious Marian Young Taylor ("A Star from Star Lake") coupled with Alex Shoumatoff's ramble about his beloved High Peaks cottage ("Memories of Ravencroft")—I enjoyed many an evening there.

Naj Wikoff
Keene Valley, NY

MORE KINDNESS

I absolutely loved reading "The Good Samaritan" (June). It's not often we learn the identity of a complete stranger who extended a random kindness. For the author to identify his good Samaritan more than five decades after his near calamity and be able to personally thank her was so heartwarming.

We need more stories like this!

Kathryn Behuniak
Newcomb, NY

TERROR AT THE TIME

Your "Manhunt Revisited" (June) article brought back so many memories. My husband and I were spending what we thought would be a quiet, relaxing Father's Day weekend at Lake Ozonia in 2015, but we were very on edge the entire time. State troopers kept driving by to ask if we'd noticed anything amiss around the lake, and we didn't go on the walks that we often take when we're in the Adirondacks, but stayed inside with the doors locked. Everyone with whom we came into contact was nervous, constantly looking over their shoulders.

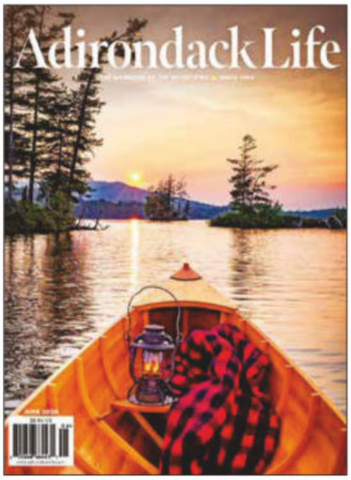
The relief after it was all over was palpable.

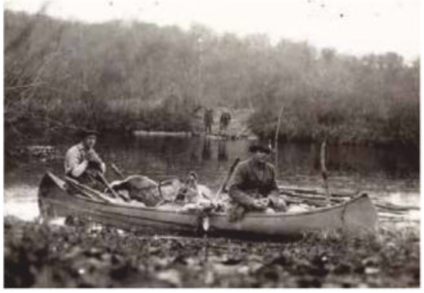
Andrea Seaton
Lake Ozonia, NY

ON EDGE

The night of the escape, we hosted an outdoor dinner party with friends. We didn't understand the gravity of the situation until those friends were stopped at six different checkpoints on their way to our house. That evening a helicopter hovered low, looking at our faces as they searched the woods around us. The next day an investigator came to the door asking to check our trail cameras. Our kids remember checkpoints just to get to school, missing fun field trips, and not being able to play outside those first few weeks of nice weather. The one positive from that time was the community coming together to help in the search. We all appreciated law enforcement's hard work to keep us safe.

Courtney Manor
Morrisonville, NY





PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

My grandfather, George Rollin Mattoon, took this photograph of George Payne's great-grandfather in 1918 ("A Secret Unveiled," June) with his No. 1, Autographic Kodak Special. It is labeled "Four Bucks: Walter Payne and his assistant at the crossing of the Cedar River."

Bob Reid
via email

Adirondack Life welcomes the views of readers. All letters are subject to editing, must be signed and should be addressed to Box 410, Jay, NY 12941.
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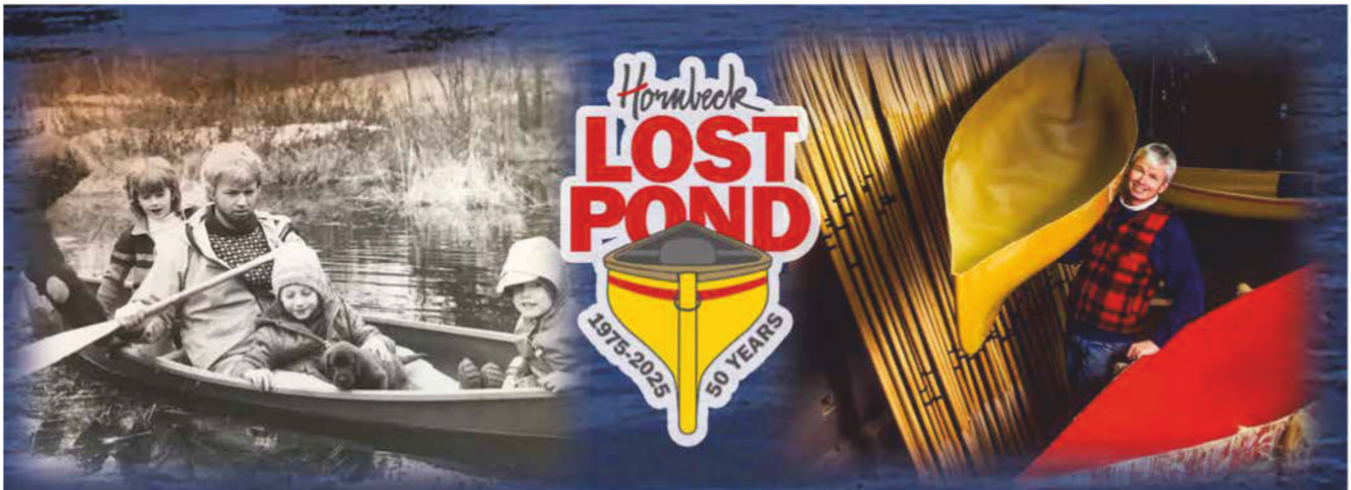

Hornbeck Boats is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the original Lost Pond boat. The first pack boat designed by founder Pete Hornbeck, it was inspired by John Henry Rushton's designs of a century earlier. Rushton's boats were made with wood. Pete used the modern materials available to him, fiberglass and Kevlar, while keeping a touch of the bygone era with wooden gunnels. The 10-foot, six-inch canoe is historically our best seller. Try one today at our pond in Olmstedville. Call 518-251-2764 to make an appointment.

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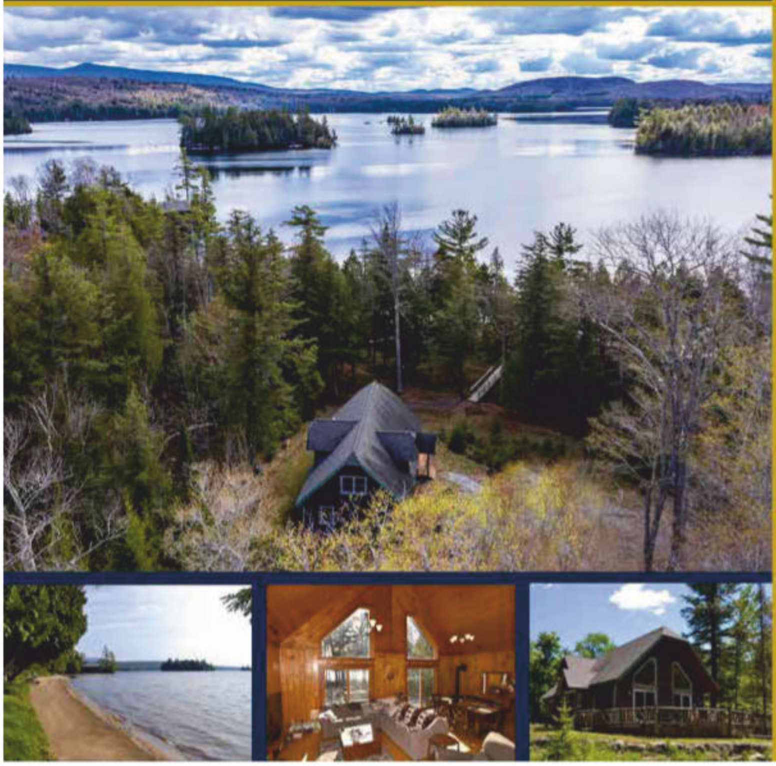

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This custom-built Adirondack style cabin has four bedrooms, two baths, and is set on a private 1.5-acre lot with 258 feet of sandy beach frontage on pristine Blue Mountain Lake. The interior features knotty pine and hardwood floors, complemented by a rustic-trimmed exterior and a spacious open deck with log railings. The kitchen has cherry cabinets and a large island with custom granite countertops. The great room features a cathedral ceiling and a gas-powered woodstove. Additional highlights include hot water baseboard heat, town water, and a newly installed boat dock. The wooded lot provides filtered lake views and southwest exposure for optimal lakeside enjoyment. Priced at $1,150,000

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PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Postcards from the Edge

Giving Lake Champlain and its valley the Adirondack love they deserve

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

The Champlain Valley is an under-appreciated "part of the park that should be explored."

When I travel around the Adirondacks, I sometimes squint my eyes, trying to imagine how the landscape looked before it was settled: Wild, tangled woods. Unencumbered rivers.

But looking out at Lake Champlain from Essex's ferry dock, I go back 13,000 years, when the freshwater lake as we know it was an inland sea. Whales swam here. Across the lake, in Charlotte, the skeleton of a beluga was discovered.

Today's 120-mile-long Lake Champlain is bordered by two countries and two states. And from Valcour Island, off the coast of Plattsburgh, all the way south near Lake George, it's part of the Adirondack Park.

Last year, in an *Adirondack Life* article about Adirondack lakes, we included Champlain. Later, a reader sent us a note that said, "I have never heard of Lake Champlain referred to as being in the Adirondacks."

Half my life I've lived in a landlocked part of the park. I've crossed Lake Champlain again and again for live music, medical appointments and to see friends, but, like that reader, it's easy to think of the lake's shoreline, what's sometimes called the Adirondack Coast, as a boundary that separates what is Adirondack and what is not. And if you spend most of your time in the park's interior, the Champlain Valley that rolls down to the water—with its open meadows and farms and, in communities like Essex, clusters of boxy 18th- and 19th-century buildings—also seems out of character. It's nothing like the lofty peaks and rustic cabins that some people associate with the Adirondacks.

Chris Maron, cofounder and former executive director of Champlain Area Trails (CATS), has lived in Westport for 25 years. He can see Lake Champlain from his front door. He says that when he and his wife, Michelle, go out on the water, "there are no other boaters, just an unexplored wild place."

That's because much of the focus in promoting the Adirondack Park is on the High Peaks, says Maron. Lake Champlain, its pastoral valley and lower-altitude mountains are often overlooked.

"Maybe people just think of the lake and the valley as a gateway," an area you have to pass through to reach the central parts of the park. "If you drive the Northway, in North Hudson you'll see the High Peaks Welcome Center. It should be the High Peaks and Champlain Valley Welcome Center," he says. "There's crowding and overuse in the High Peaks, while the Champlain Area Trails are an undiscovered part of the park that should be explored."

He's right. CATS has created more than a hundred miles of trails in the eastern Adirondacks that meander through forests, farms, fields and up and down mountains. They're accessible and family-friendly.

And Lake Champlain? This vast recreational playground can be experienced from one of many public beaches, by boat or, if you scuba dive, beneath its depths, where remnants of a vibrant maritime history remain. Anglers make big catches and birders spot herons, egrets and other species.

Again, I squint my eyes, this time from a spit of land facing Valcour Island. I've been here before to imagine the chaos of the 1776 naval battle that happened in this bay and, a century after that, the free-love commune that took residence on Valcour. But what I see now is a protected island—no condos, no bright lights. Just another part of the Adirondack Park.

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Northern Lights

Bear in Mind

After a mama bear and her two cubs that frequented the Old Forge area were euthanized by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) last summer due to human misbehavior—including people surrounding the trio to snap pictures and campers improperly storing food—the Town of Webb board voted to adopt a local law that issues fines between $1,000 and $1,500 to those caught feeding or harassing wild animals.

New York State law also prohibits the intentional feeding of black bears. Incidental feeding of bears becomes unlawful once a written warning has been issued; it can result in penalties of up to 15 days in jail and fines of up to $250.

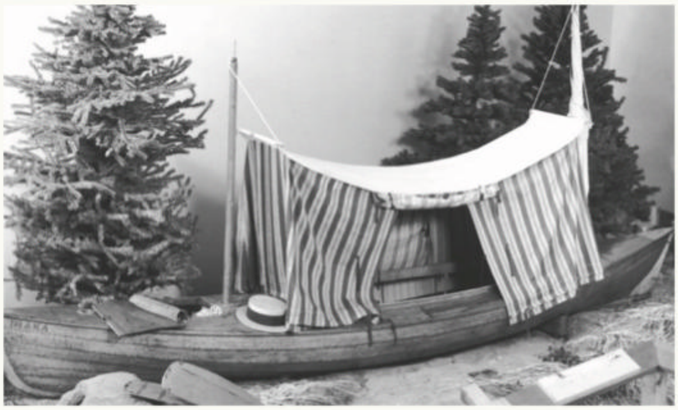
The DEC partners with the national program BearWise to educate the public about how to live responsibly with black bears. Visit bearwise.org to learn more.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE SANKER PHOTOGRAPHY

TIME TREK

Mobile Home

Nicholas Longworth, charter member of the American Canoe Association—an organization launched on the shores of Lake George in 1880—designed this Princess model with boatbuilder J. H. Rushton, of Canton. In 1884 Charles Neide, of Albany, sailed his own Princess canoe from Lake George to the Gulf of Mexico, sleeping beneath a tent that was erected over the cockpit.



Princess model cruising canoe, 1882, from the Adirondack Experience collection.

Words with Friends

The Adirondack Family Book Festival—billed as a celebration of community, diversity and storytelling—returns to John Brown Farm State Historic Site on August 16, starting at 9:30 a.m. The gathering, which is hosted by the social justice organization John Brown Lives!, will bring together a multicultural group of YA and children's authors and illustrators for a day of readings, talks, hands-on art projects and more. For details visit adirondackfamilybookfestival.com.

QUOTABLE

> "In a rural community like Tupper Lake, options for out-of-school activities are often limited.... The AmeriCorps members have worked closely with students, some of whom need extra attention, encouragement, and mentorship. The loss of this programming, with its ability to build long-term capacity through service, will impact the momentum we've built over the past few years."

—Elizabeth Littlefield, principal of Tupper Lake's L.P. Quinn Elementary, on the news that the Federal Government had terminated all New York AmeriCorps programs, including the Wild Center's AmeriCorps for School-Community Partnership Program.

The Lowdown on Lows

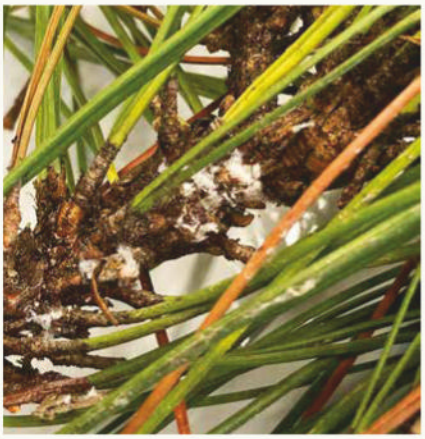
The Open Space Institute (OSI) has secured an agreement with the Scouting America–Longhouse Council to purchase the 1,500-acre Sabattis Scout Reservation on Lows Lake for $2 million, with plans to transfer the tract to the state for inclusion in the Forest Preserve. The property, located southwest of Tupper Lake, would become part of the Five Ponds Wilderness Area.

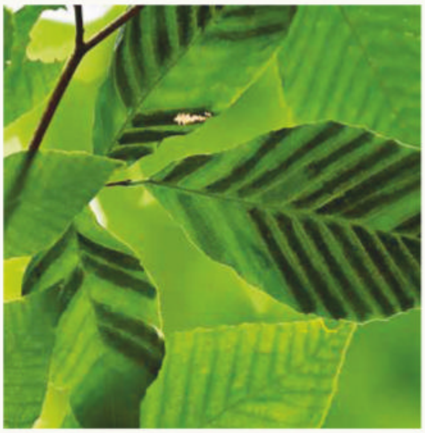
"Conserving at-risk summer camps allows OSI to protect some of the state's most remote and pristine areas while increasing access to nature for everyone," said Erik Kulleseid, OSI's president and CEO.

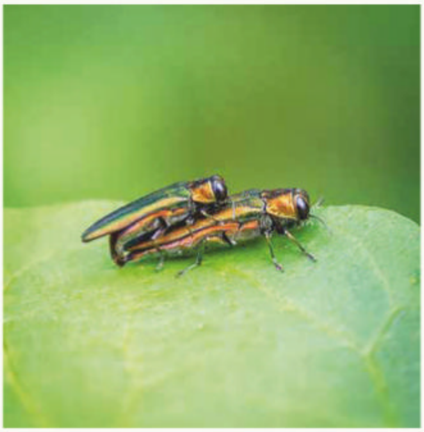
LOWS LAKE AND BEECH LEAF PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ISTOCK. BOOK FESTIVAL PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JOHN BROWN LIVES! POTTERS RESORT AND CANOE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ADIRONDACK EXPERIENCE. PINE SCALE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE DEC. ARTS CENTER PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ALCA

Threat Alert

INVASIVES ON THE MOVE







RED PINE SCALE, a tiny insect native to Japan that, in the U.S., attacks red pine, was identified in Hague last summer; that October, an outbreak was found nearby, in the Pharaoh Lakes Wilderness. So far, these are the northernmost points that the invasive has been identified in New York.

If you think you've found an affected tree—look for woolly clumps at the base of red pine needles—contact the Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Health Research Lab at foresthealth@dec.ny.gov.

BEECH LEAF DISEASE is thought to be associated with *Litylenchus crenatae ssp. Mccannii*, an invasive worm. The disease was first found in the southwestern Adirondacks in 2022, then in the town of Bolton in 2023. According to the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program (APIPP), beech leaf disease can kill mature trees in 6–10 years and younger trees in 2–3 years.

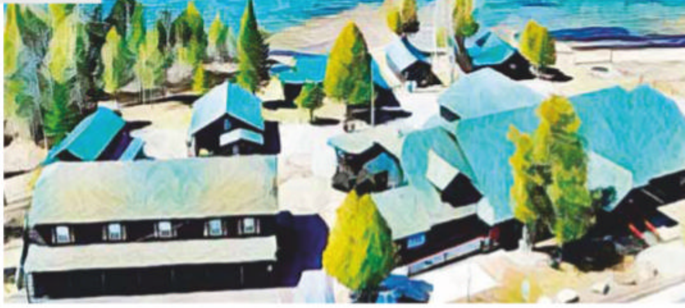
Symptoms include dark striping between veins, curling leaves and a leathery leaf texture. Learn more at www.adkinvasives.com.

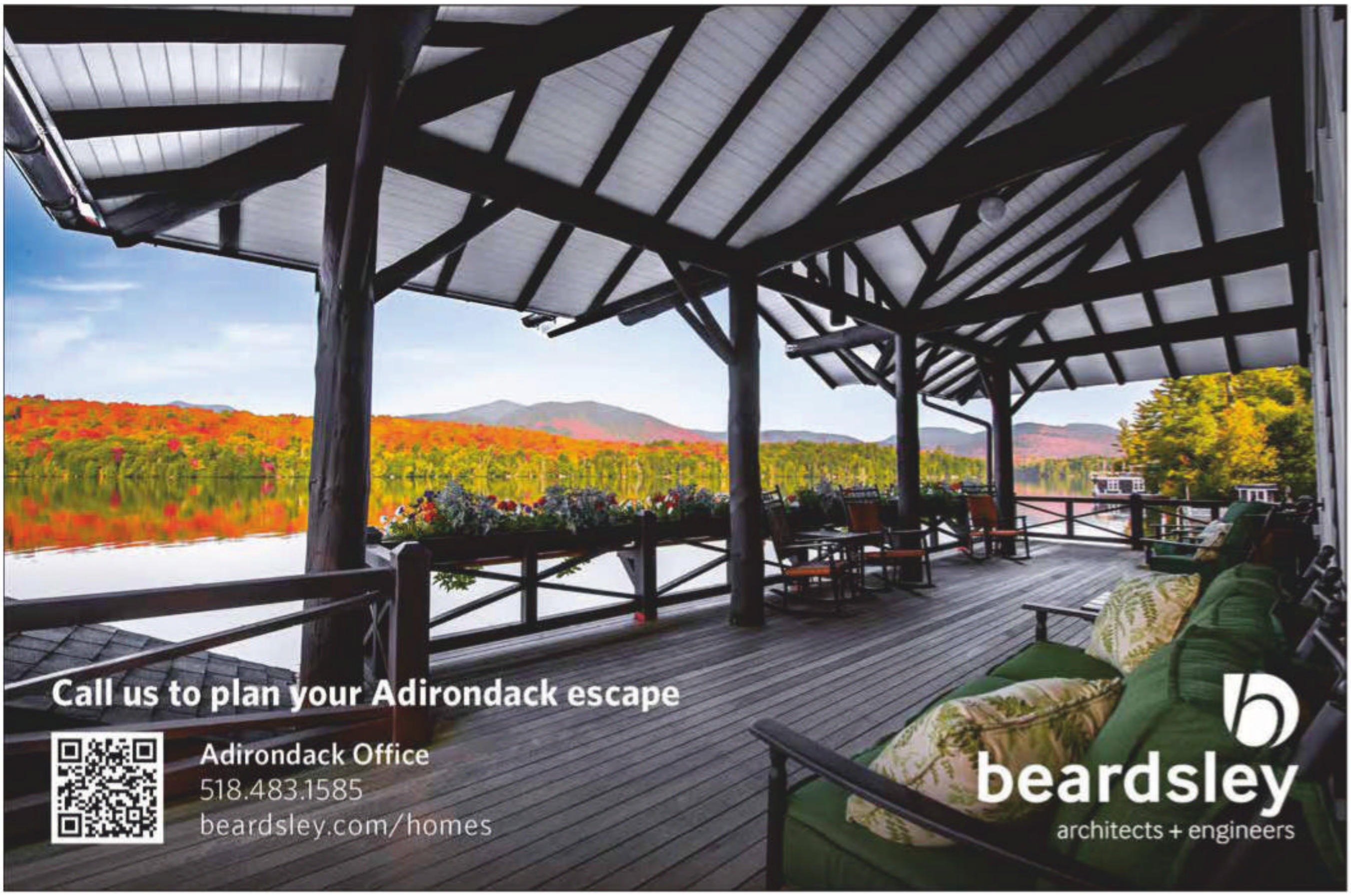
WASPS TO THE RESCUE? Last summer the emerald ash borer was discovered in Essex County, leaving only two Adirondack counties—Lewis and Hamilton—where the devastating invasive has not been documented.

But there may be hope: tiny parasitic wasps that kill the ash borer's eggs or larvae. APIPP released about 8,500 wasps on 40 acres of private property in Warren County over the last two years, and this summer the group will begin monitoring the property to determine if the wasps have gained a foothold.

Change of Venue

Since 1967, the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts (ALCA) has flourished in the bright, scallop-shingled building at the heart of Blue Mountain Lake. But the center has grown out of its old digs, so in May it moved to the hamlet's historic Potters Resort—a larger lakeside property that had been home to the storied Elbow Room bar and, most recently, the now-shuttered Strong Rope Brewery taphouse. The complex, which includes a performance hall, galleries and waterfront cottages, will host a packed season of concerts, speakers, workshops and exhibits; cottages will be available for rent through early fall. Learn more about ALCA and upcoming events at www.adirondackarts.org.





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PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Long Lake's Windfall

A transformative gift for this tiny town

BY BRIAN MANN

The 36,487-acre Whitney tract includes more than 100 miles of undeveloped waterfront land, dozens of lakes and ponds, two Great Camps and other historic structures.

When Long Lake supervisor Clay Arsenault announced the Whitney estate's mega-gift in March, he called it "one of the most significant events in the town's history." He wasn't boasting. Proceeds from the sale of the nearby Whitney Park, listed for $125 million, will go entirely to the former logging town, with no restrictions on how the money can be used.

"I was, for one of the few times in my life, speechless," Arsenault said, describing the moment when he heard the news. "I didn't know what to say. Then it went into jolly, happy celebration. Then we thought, Let's get straight to business."

The 36,487-acre tract includes more than a hundred miles of undeveloped waterfront land with dozens of lakes and ponds, much of it bordering pristine Adirondack wilderness. On the property are Great Camp Deerlands and other historic structures. The estate had been owned by the celebrated philanthropist and socialite Marylou Whitney, who died in 2019, and then by her husband John Hendrickson, whom she married in 1997, and who passed away last year. Both were longtime donors to local causes in Long Lake, but this bequest was on a breathtakingly different scale.

"Their generosity through the years did not adequately prepare us to learn that John left the town with a gift of this magnitude and transformational potential," Arsenault said in the town's official announcement. "It is totally unexpected, amazing, and will provide incredible opportunities for our community that will have a profound and positive impact for generations to come."

Grasping the scope and complexity of a donation this eye-popping in a community this small is difficult. Long Lake was settled as a rugged frontier town in the 1830s and still has a population of about 800 year-round residents. In a typical year, the entire municipal budget runs around $6 million. Like most of Hamilton County, the community has struggled in recent decades.

Stores bustle in the summer when vacation homes and tourist rentals fill up. But the downtown and many neighborhoods go dark when visitors drift away in the fall. There's no longer a year-round grocery store. The number of students in the school district has dwindled to 64.

"There's a need in these small towns, a lack of industry, a lot of people have suffered, so something like this is a beautiful thing," agreed Barbara Kinsey, who lives in nearby Blue Mountain Lake and owns the Waypoint Café, in Long Lake.

While talking to people in town, I heard a range of big hopes and some anxiety over what such a massive infusion of cash might mean. Some said they think the money should help pay for new infrastructure, in part to protect neighborhoods from the kind of flooding that struck Long Lake in 2023. Others want to see construction of some kind of civic center, possibly with an upgrade to the town's open-air ice-skating arena.

"I think it's going to be a great thing when the sale comes to fruition," said Bobby Helms, a longtime worker at Hoss's Country Corner, in Long Lake. "I think a roof over the top of the rink would be great. I ran that rink for one winter and with the warming trend, the rain is the kiss of death."

Many locals seemed both excited and a little daunted by what amounts to an entire community snagging a winning lottery ticket. "It's amazing and really hopeful, but I hope it doesn't change us too much," said John Seils, owner of Brookside Hops & Hoagies, who has lived in Long Lake for eight years. "I don't want us to become a big Adirondack tourist town like Lake Placid or Old Forge."

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But Seils also said he hopes the gift will help Long Lake avoid a future many Adirondack towns have faced, where the local school closes and basic services erode. “I do fear what could happen in my lifetime. You could see communities like this shrink into a three-month season where nothing’s open in the winter, with very few locals. This gives us a chance for something different,” he said.

One of the biggest questions now is how these decisions will be made once the sale goes through. The property was listed at a price of $180 million in 2020, but there were no buyers. After Hendrickson’s death, it was taken off the market. Now that it’s been officially listed, the town promises transparency and an open decision-making process.

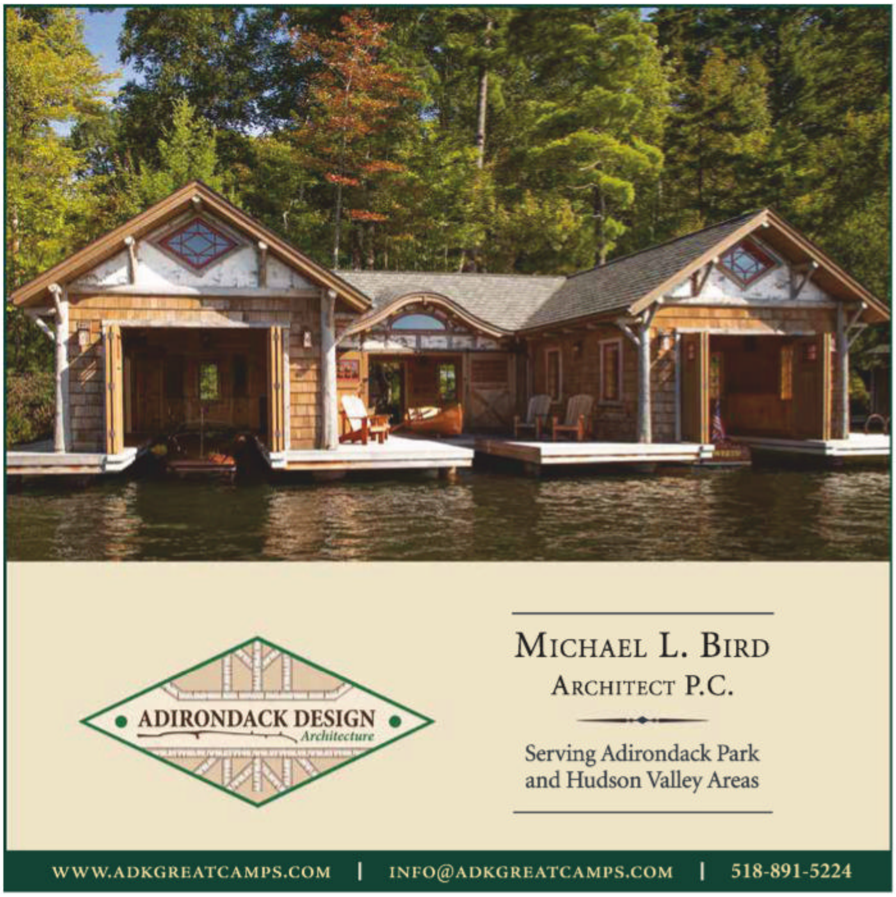
Arsenault said he expects the town board to take the lead initially, but he thinks some kind of new organization will be created with a board of trustees working to safeguard the money. “We’re taking steps not to prepare for spending the money, but planning for protection of the money.

“We’re going to separate it from personal and political whims. That doesn’t mean we’re not going to accomplish more projects, but we don’t want to break off large chunks of money just to quiet the squeaky wheels.”

The ultimate goal, according to Arsenault, is to create a permanent investment fund that will generate revenue for the town—which includes the nearby hamlet of Raquette Lake—over the long term. Asked if he has a personal vision for what his community might look like after the Whitney dollars begin to roll in, Arsenault said that picture will evolve over time.

“I hope to make it possible for future generations of Long Lake to write their own history. But I do believe this is a game-changer. It’s independence, it’s armor. It means more personal opportunities for our people, more jobs, more construction, more business and more housing.” ▲

Brian Mann is a correspondent for National Public Radio and a frequent contributor to *Adirondack Life*. He lives in Westport.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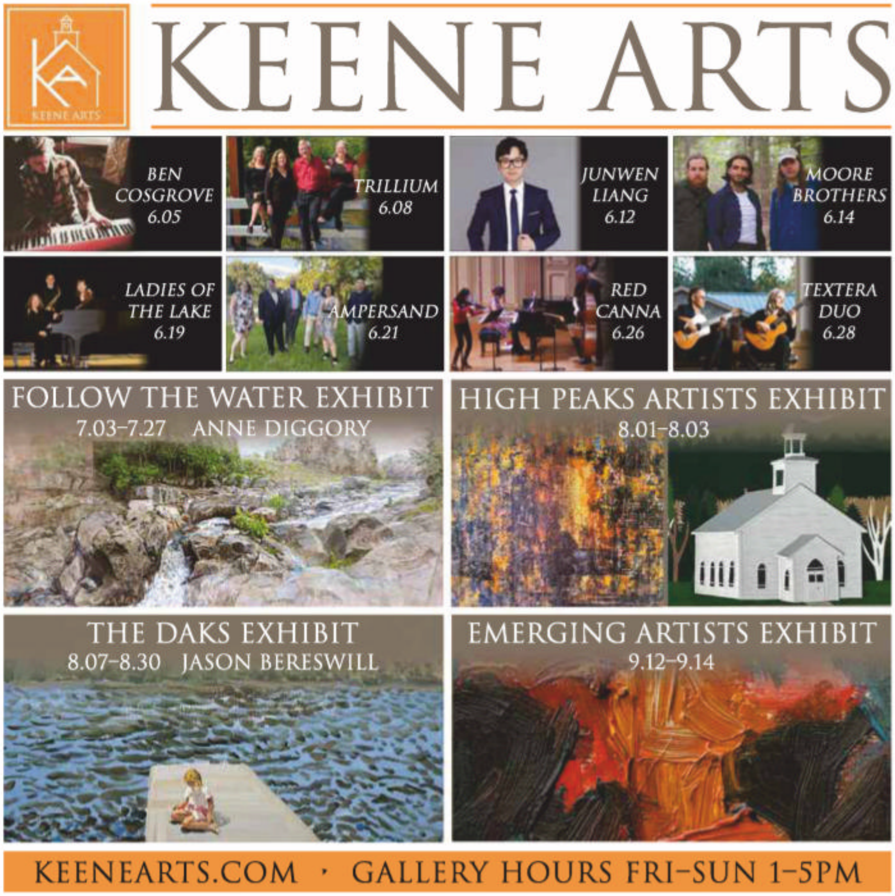
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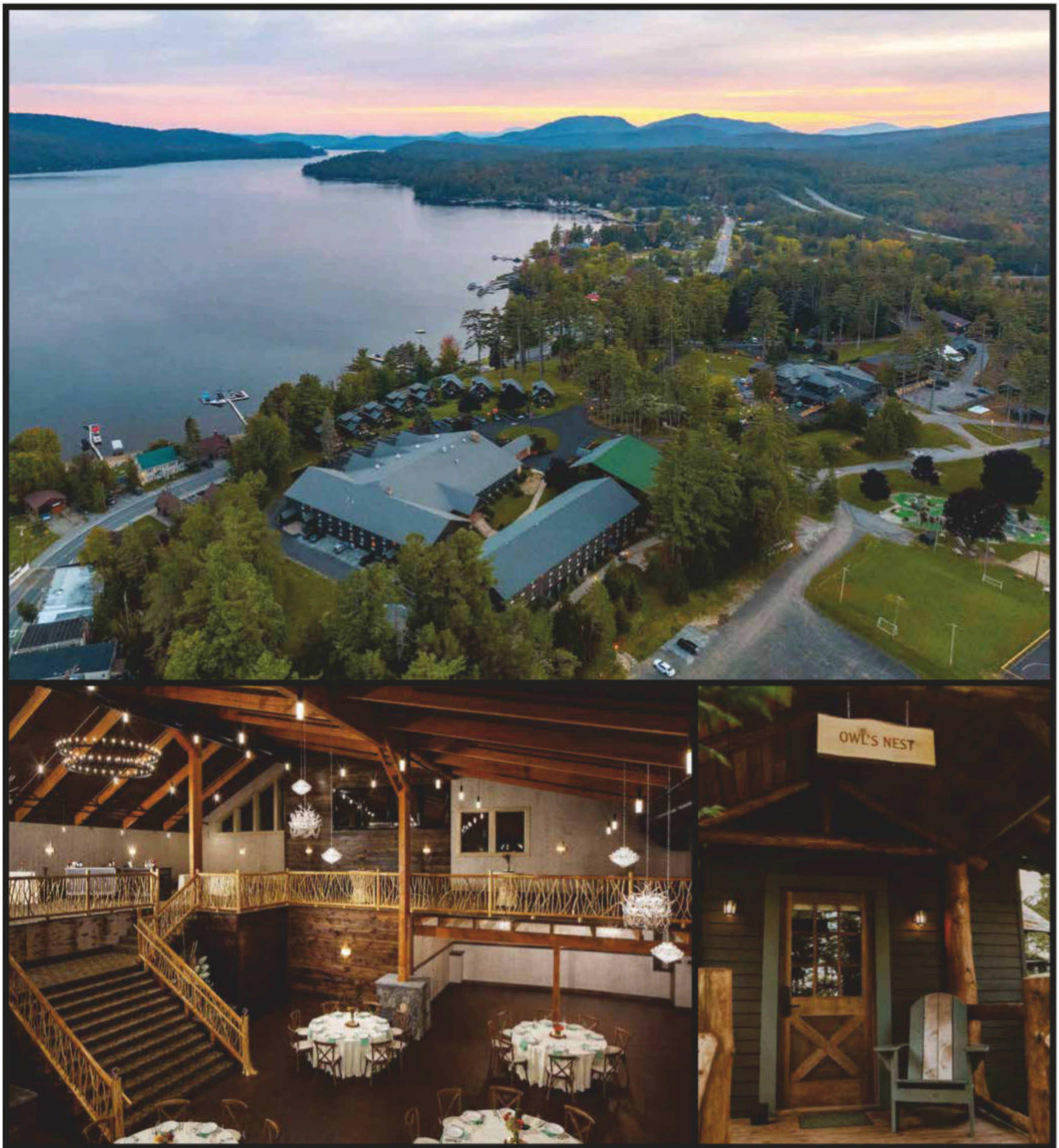

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Mac of All Trades

The journey of a Champlain Valley artist

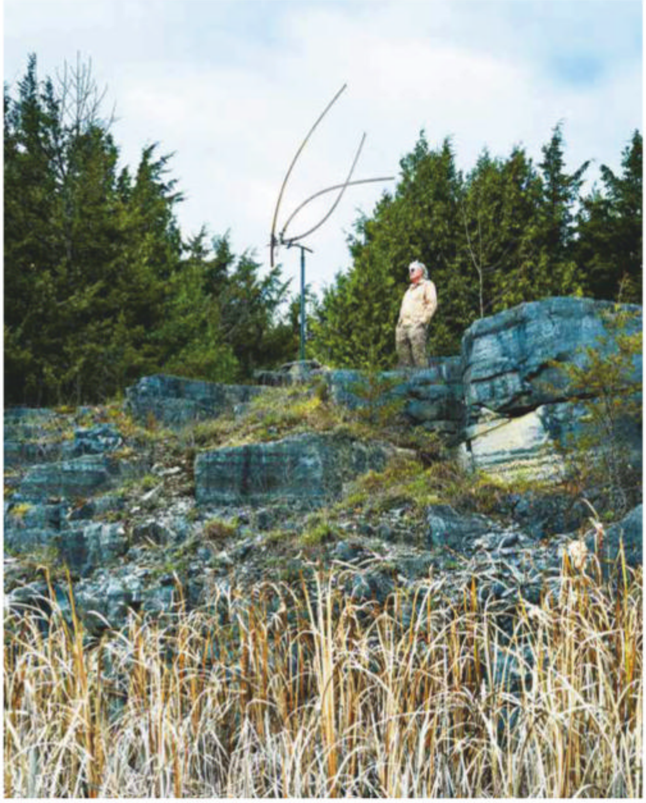
BY CHRISTOPHER LOCKE

In the art world, there's something thrilling, even a little dangerous, about the latest "bad boy" artistic prodigy exploding onto the scene.

Take Essex-based artist Lawrence "Mac" MacDevitt. In just a few short years, Mac has built a formidable reputation: He's a 2024 Individual Artist Grant recipient, courtesy of the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts. His *Sky Beams* sculptures debuted at the Essex Quarry Trail and Nature Preserve last fall. (Each of the five pieces has two or three elegantly curved, 12-foot-long laminated cedar beams mounted on a weathered steel stand. Some rotate in the wind.) As an artist-in-residence at Craigardan, an arts organization and working farm in Elizabethtown, Mac worked tirelessly despite a recent knee operation. He's cofounder of Bell Fire Arts, a cutting-edge initiative that organizes and celebrates artists throughout the Adirondacks. And he founded the SpeakEazy storytelling open mic and served as its host for 30 months straight.

So what's next for this unstoppable "enfant terrible?"

Probably his daily nap at four p.m. Mac is 81 years old.



Mac MacDevitt at his Essex studio and with one of his *Sky Beams* sculptures at the Essex Quarry Trail and Nature Preserve.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN STECHSCHULTE

"Gotta keep those batteries charged," he says with a smile.

In his living room stands a black, bulbous thing about the size of a coffee table, a geometric oddity that shoots light out of its center—a new project he says he's working on.

It's smaller than his usual work. Mac tends to create large-scale outdoor sculptures. His *Moon Circle* sculpture consists of a six-foot-wide, eight-and-a-half-foot-high hoop made from fiberglass materials—"rescued from a failed project"—attached to a steel base. The sculpture includes two stools so viewers can position the giant ring and watch the moonrise through it. He set it up in a neighbor's yard, overlooking Lake Champlain; it was later displayed at the Strand Arts Center, in Plattsburgh.

Born in 1944 in New York City, Mac grew up in Great Neck. His dad was a captain in the Army during World War II, which kept Mac from officially meeting his father until he was two years old.

Raised Roman Catholic, Mac was an altar boy until the sixth grade and remembers the nuns with a grimace. He went to Ohio's Oberlin College but dropped out, finishing his bachelor's degree at Shimer College, in Illinois. He earned his master of arts in teaching from Antioch, back in Ohio.

For many years, Mac served as a psychotherapist in Vermont, and it wasn't until his mid-50s that he began to think about what part, if any, art should play in his life.

"I was at my monthly men's group when I suddenly thought, Oh, my god, if I died tomorrow, would I feel I did everything I was supposed to do?"

With no formal art training, Mac dove in; he got an apprenticeship at Bread & Puppet Theater, in Glover, Vermont, and spent a summer crafting and performing with puppets.

He tried different styles of creative expression, never concerned with any perceived "success." He hand-built an ambitious piece called a *Sky Yurt* and presented a large prototype at the Maker Faire at Shelburne Farms in 2013. But after a sudden crack in the yurt's "ribs," he discovered the beams couldn't support their own weight. His response: no biggie. He had a website for the project detailing its progress—and setbacks—with one entry, entitled "I ain't no designer," asking for suggestions.

The SpeakEazy storytelling series—originally hosted by Whitcomb's Arts, in Whallonsburg, and now at Plattsburgh's Old Soul Design Shop—was inspired by the time Mac and his wife of 40 years, Darla, lived in Chicago. The city has a vibrant storytelling scene that Mac says he wanted to replicate here. At the open mics, farmers, grandmothers, academics and teenagers sign up for seven minutes on stage. Some stories are hilarious, others heartbreaking, but one thing remains the same: "We are obnoxiously supportive of the tellers, and we give them a judgment-free platform."

When it comes to art, Mac says he's "inspired by what is around me. I like to recycle and reuse. I also get hooked on an object, like a simple red Ikea kitchen chair. I have a few more chairs now and I have an idea for a new sculpture."

He adds, "I used to be in a relationship with a woman many years ago who said, 'Why can't we be like everybody else?' But Darla told me early on, 'I never want us to be like everybody else.'" ▲

See Mac MacDevitt's *Sky Beams* sculptures at the Essex Quarry Trail and Nature Preserve, on Lake Shore Road.

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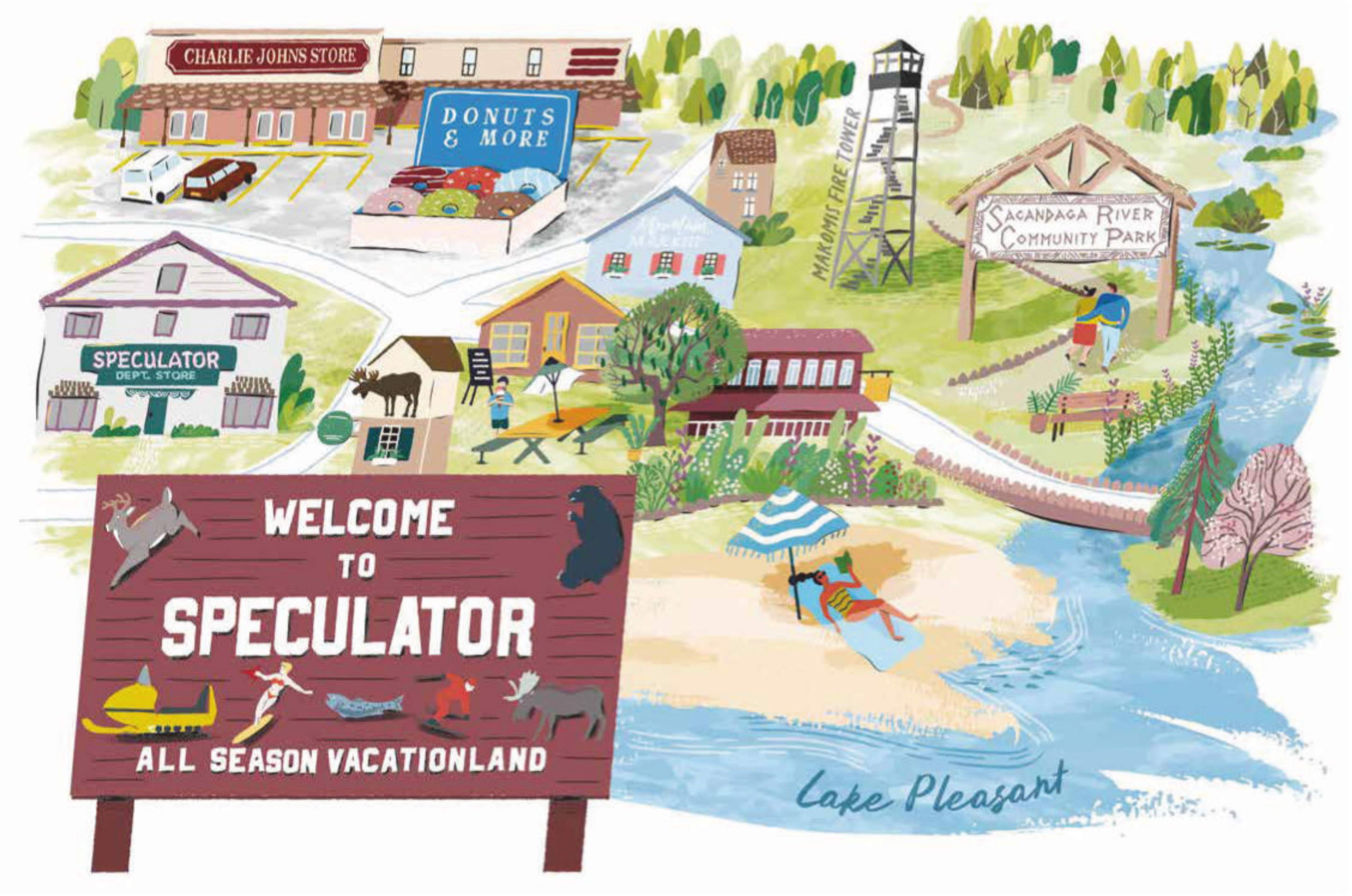

At the Corners

The many charms of Speculator

BY NIKI KOUROFSKY

Speculator has been drawing pleasure-seekers for more than a century.

My daughter is 19 now, but her eyes still light up when we talk about our family's trip to Speculator back when she was small. "That town was *so fun*," she says. And why not? We visited on a July 4th weekend, camped at the Moffitt Beach state campground, watched fireworks at the town beach, got a sugar high at Donuts & More, and she even bounced down a giant, inflatable slide at the park. We also discovered a hermit's hideout—Kunjamuk Cave, rumored to have been overnight accommodations for French Louie—and popped over to nearby Wells to hike the Pine Orchard trail.

That may have been the weekend's only hiccup. I'd misremembered the length of the trail (five miles round trip) and there was a full-scale revolt halfway through, with my daughter plopping down and refusing to go farther until her father agreed to carry her for a spell. The drama didn't last—we still have a picture of her happily trying to wrap her arms around one of the massive old-growth trees at the end of the trail.

I've taken many trips to Speculator during my time at this magazine, and I can verify that there's a lot to this place, even if you don't hit town on a holiday weekend or you're too old to bounce down a slide.

It's been a popular southern Adirondack getaway since the community first grew up near Lake Pleasant's outlet in the 19th century, back when it was known as Newton's Corners. (The bulk of the modern village still clusters around the four corners at the intersection of Routes 8 and 30 and Elm Lake Road. Newton, in case you're wondering, was the original postmaster.)

The Osborne Inn, boasting a dance hall, bar and training ring for boxers, was a hopping destination in the early 20th century, attracting superstar fighters—including Gene Tunney and Max Baer—as well as fans and sportswriters. The pretty point where it once stood is

ILLUSTRATION BY GWEN JAMISON VOGEL

now a lakeside park.

Decades later, John D. MacDonald—author of *Cape Fear* and a series of best-selling detective novels—became a regular at Zeiser's Restaurant, another long-gone landmark.

But one of the community's most colorful characters was Louis Seymour, better known as French Louie, a hermit with a cabin up West Canada Lake way and a network of temporary camps throughout the area. (One may have been the cave that my family visited.) Twice a year he'd come into Newton's Corners to sell his furs and get his fill of the nightlife.

I've had a small taste of that nightlife. I don't remember what I'd been assigned to cover on my first trip to town, back when I was a cub reporter, but I do recall the welcoming taproom at Melody Lodge, with its regulars' mugs hanging on hooks above the bar.

The lodge—perched on a hill with a grand view—has been a community staple for decades, built in 1912 as a music conservatory for girls and operated as a restaurant and inn since the 1930s. Early last year the newest owners, Kate and Andy Buyea, hired a contractor specializing in historic restoration to give the place a makeover. They hope to reopen this summer.

The Buyeas haven't been the only ones rehabbing a beloved building—in the last handful of years there's been something of a renaissance happening around town. The PERKS of Speculator, a café offering melt-in-your-mouth baked goods, plus creative caffeinated drinks and breakfast and lunch menus, recently moved from the former Zeiser's Restaurant to the building that once reigned as the King of the Frosties. The new space will be open by the time you're reading these pages. And never fear, Frosties lovers: the ice-cream window will still sling your favorite treats under its original royal name.

That's not the only ice-cream game in town. Speculator Creamery, a sweet little roadside stand that opened in 2019, features a mix of old-fashioned favorites, specialty sundaes, and offbeat soft-serve flavors like bubblegum,

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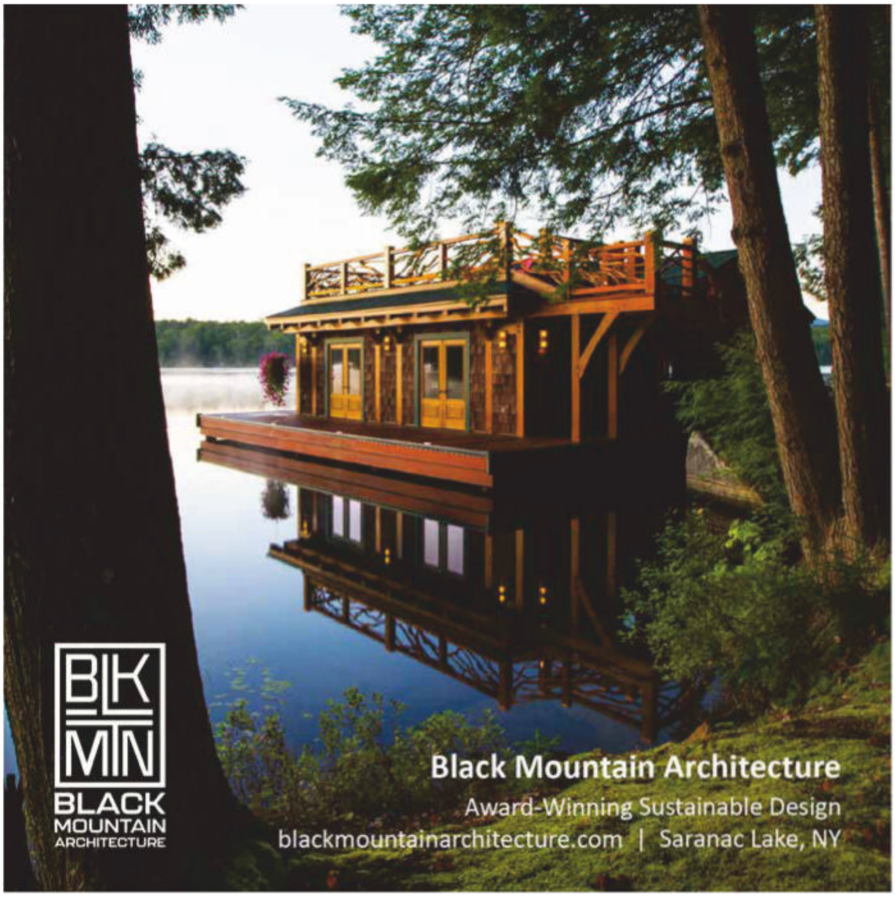

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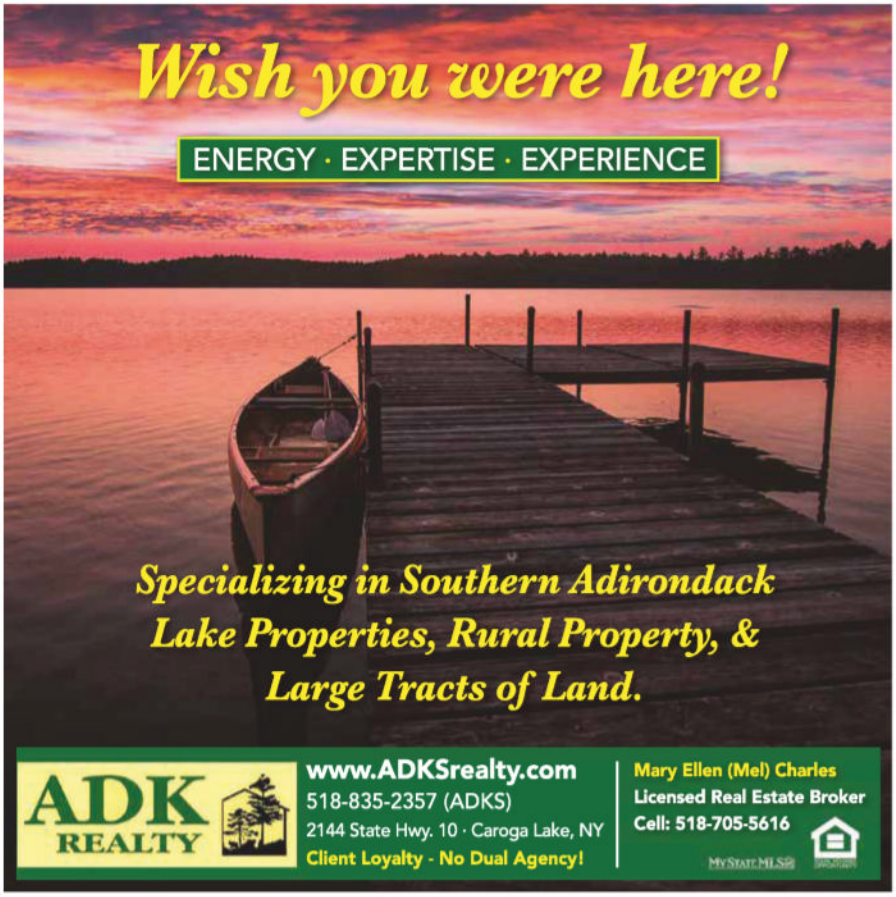

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apple pie and s'more. If you've really come to play, order the Frisbee Sundae, with mounds of ice cream and toppings served on—you guessed it—a Speculator Creamery Frisbee.

A little farther down Route 8 from the four corners, the former Lemon Tree snowmobile/marine service and sales shop has been completely re-imagined as the Lemon Tree Brewery, an Adirondacky taproom with craft beers and wines, where you can gather around an outdoor fire pit in the evenings or catch a band on the weekends.

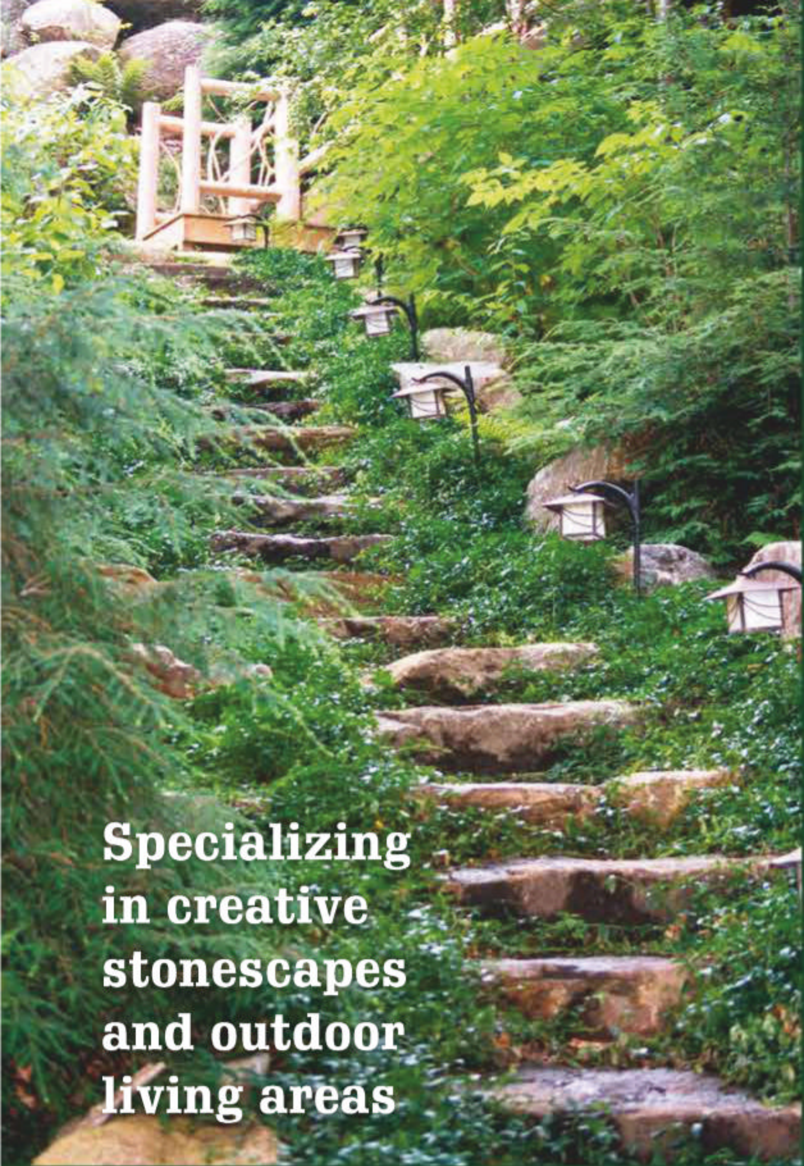
Across the road from the public beach stands another piece of the past that's been given new life: a vintage fire tower. Built in 1916 on Makomis Mountain, in North Hudson, the lookout was reassembled at Sacandaga River Community Park in 2022, allowing for bird's-eye views without all the bother of hiking a mountain.

After a climb up the tower, stroll along the three-quarter-mile Sacandaga River Pathway, an accessible interpretive trail exploring the natural and human history of the area. There's a picnic spot with grills overlooking the river; restrooms are available near the beginning of the walk.

In a different corner of the community park, behind the playground, hides an unexpected slice of Americana—a small-scale ode to Route 66, with a mini general store, gas station, church, barber shop and more. The models were built on a whim by a seasonal resident who'd honeymooned along the legendary route; he later donated the buildings to the local historical society and the tableau was moved to its current location.

That teensy town mirrors the village at large: a place with everything you want—including the iconic shops that anchor the community, 86-year-old Charlie Johns and the Speculator Department Store, which was founded a decade later—in a pocket-sized package that's still *so fun*.

For local events and recreational opportunities—including directions to Kunjamuk Cave—visit www.speculatorchamber.com.



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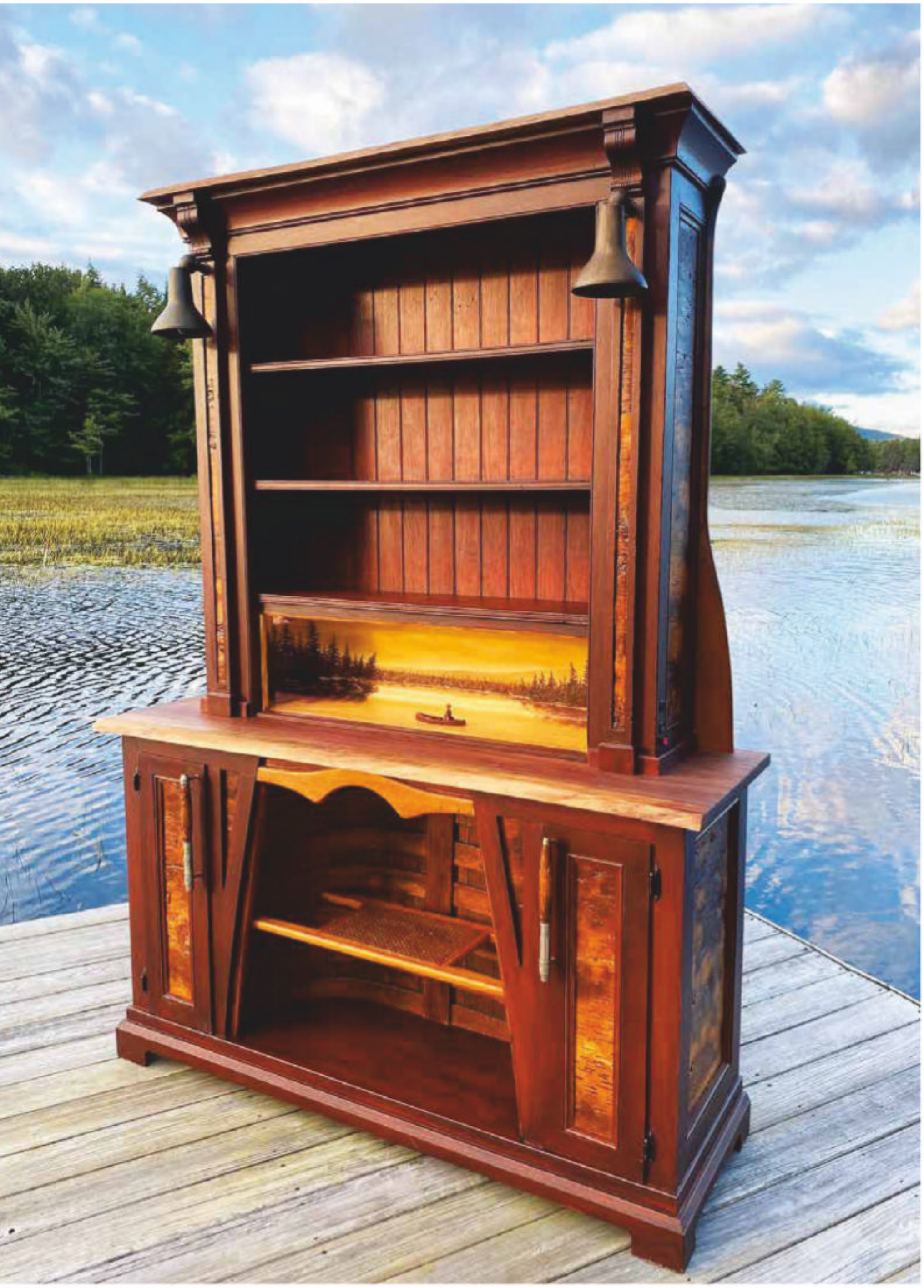
Rustic Invention

The Adirondack-inspired work of artist Paul Lakata

BY JANE SCHNEIDER



Artist Paul Lakata brought home one of the most coveted honors at the Rustic Furniture Fair in September 2024. The annual exhibition, mounted by Adirondack Experience, in Blue Mountain Lake, showcases artisans who specialize in crafting classic and contemporary rustic furnishings. Lakata received the People's Choice Award for his cabinet entitled *Peaceful Paddle*, an honor the public votes on in recognition of outstanding work.

Lakata's cabinet features a diorama of a canoeist paddling an Adirondack lake. The scene's whimsy made it a hit among fairgoers, who gladly stood in line throughout the day to gaze in wonder at the miniature display.

"Paul always brings something exceptional and surprising in his work," says Rustic Fair coordinator Liz Belyea, the public programs manager at Adirondack Experience. "It can be challenging to make rustic work stand out, but Paul has done that."

Lakata has been a regular fair exhibitor since the mid-2000s, when he first turned his talents to creating rustic art. The Johnstown native isn't sure exactly how many awards he's garnered over the years, but enough. His website features images of his cabinets and consoles, made largely of pine and trimmed in hemlock or black walnut. Each piece is eye-catching in its detail. His oil paintings, too, are reminiscent of the storied past of the Adirondacks: rugged, romantic, wild.

The artist's enduring excellence led

***Peaceful Paddle*, Paul Lakata's award-winning cabinet.**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PAUL LAKATA

museum administrators to purchase one of his pieces for their permanent collection in 2024.

Lakata has long been drawn to art. Even as a child, "I always liked drawing and often had a pencil in my hand," he says. At age 12, Lakata painted a race-car mural on his bedroom wall and it turned out so well, a classmate asked to have one for his bedroom. "That sort of started it all," he says. Lakata went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree from Goddard College, in Vermont.

Lakata works as a graphic designer and sign-maker at Barney's Sign Company, a business he co-owns in Johnstown with his brother, John. Since the mid-1990s, they've produced signage for companies around the region, often incorporating distinctive artwork into their pieces. Their reputation eventually led to Cooperstown, where Lakata was hired to create wall-sized murals for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. He also began painting sepia-toned portraits of baseball's early greats, such as Mickey Mantle and Lou Gehrig. While handsomely rendered, the paintings didn't sell well among collectors. "Because I didn't have a name," notes Lakata. "And I was so busy with the Cooperstown work, I didn't have time to do anything else."

So in the early 2000s, fellow artist Barney Bellinger suggested his friend check out the Rustic Fair, where Bellinger was a participant. There, Lakata encountered distinctive examples of handcrafted rustic decor. The style captured his imagination and he began considering what he could contribute to the genre. He started with frame-building as a way of enhancing his oil paintings. Bellinger gave him tips on how best to work with bark.

Lakata uses native woods, largely yellow and white birch, hemlock and pine. But instead of applying the bark's outer layer to frames as many artists do, he discovered that the wood's darker underside, particularly when aged and rotted, made a handsome counterpoint for his sepia-toned paintings. "No one else was doing that kind of work, so my paintings were well received.

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He then moved on to furniture building, though today Lakata doesn't consider himself a master cabinetmaker.

"My work is more free form," he observes modestly. Working without plans, "I simply build as I go."

The beauty of Lakata's cabinetry is how each piece reflects his ingenuity and know-how. Some include nostalgic paintings, an interesting use of bark and twigs, or moving elements, details that place his work in a category all its own. For example, a stout, two-door wine cabinet is capped with a diorama of an Adirondack lake at twilight. It features a tiny steam launch, with an American flag at its stern, that magically motors around the lake as the golden hour turns the scene a shimmering amber. The effect is charming.

Lakata's stout wine cabinet includes a diorama of an Adirondack lake at twilight. It features a tiny steam launch, with an American flag at its stern, that magically motors around the lake.

To create the niche, Lakata starts with a Styrofoam base he hollows out. This gives the diorama its depth. He covers the surface with joint compound, then sands and preps it for painting. The mechanism that moves the launch is actually a magnet with a small motor that's hidden beneath the shelf. The project took him a year to complete.

"I rebuilt the boat three times to make it scale and to make everything seem believable," he says. "I wanted it to have the feel of an Adirondack scene."

To capture those scenes, Lakata reads and studies historic photographs from the Adirondack Park's early years. One of his influences is painter and photographer Seneca Ray Stoddard, who was among the first to capture the Adirondacks in pictures, popularized by his guidebooks published in the late 1800s.

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Some of Lakata's more traditional landscapes arise from his own photo references or plein air renderings, others are a composite of elements: a canoe from a painting or a fly-fisherman from a magazine cover. Lakata's contemporary images reflect what he calls impressionistic realism and are sometimes shown frameless, with the canvas simply attached to a tree limb or a rugged piece of bark.

The 65-year-old artist makes his home on Caroga Lake, north of Johnstown, where he and his wife raised two sons. His garage functions as his studio space, a generous, well-lit room filled with power tools, tree limbs and furniture in varying stages of completion.

Inspiration strikes rather unexpectedly, it would seem. During a visit to the Orvis sporting goods store in Queensbury, Lakata spied a media console with a beautiful guideboat sitting beside it. Wouldn't it be interesting to marry the two? he mused. Soon he was sketching ideas, and in the finished piece, the television screen rises from beneath the guideboat.

In another cabinet that incorporates a guideboat, the completed vessel was cut into three sections. But the results are equally inspiring. Each part of the boat bookends the cabinet, the interior lined with a dark birch bark. The cabinet is crowned with a sign that reads "Guide Services and Supplies" and is connected with an oar on either side. The center section features a landscape as a focal point, and here, the craft's hand-woven seat serves as a shelf on the lower half of the cabinet.

"Using the guideboat was a surprising element," says the Adirondack Experience's Belyea. "I love that about Paul's work, his attention to detail is really exquisite."

That attention to detail is what keeps collectors and fans coming back for more, says Lakata. "People look forward to seeing what I'll come up with next."

And truth be told, so does he.

See more of Paul Lakata's work at paullakata.com. Visit www.adirondacklife.com to watch the artist's *Peaceful Paddle* in action.

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IDEM IDYLL

The classic sloops of Upper St. Regis Lake

photographs by BY JORDAN CRAIG

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THIS SUMMER MARKS the 125th year that a fleet of Idem sloops will slice Upper St. Regis Lake's waters, their antique hulls balancing precariously as their crews navigate a racecourse established back when McKinley was president.

Eleven of a dozen boats, first designed in 1897 by Clinton Crane for the St. Regis Yacht Club, are still privately owned and maintained on one of the park's most exclusive lakes. (The 12th is on display at the Adirondack Experience, in Blue Mountain Lake.) On race days spectators paddle the water's edge to watch the action, but also to admire the historic Great Camps that hug the shoreline. Among them are Camp Katia, with its circular, cobblestone boathouse; the Vanderbilts' Pine Tree Point pagoda; Camp Top Ridge, originally Marjorie Merriweather Post's over-the-top rustic getaway; and Camp Wild Air's octagonal log outbuilding that appears to float on the water.

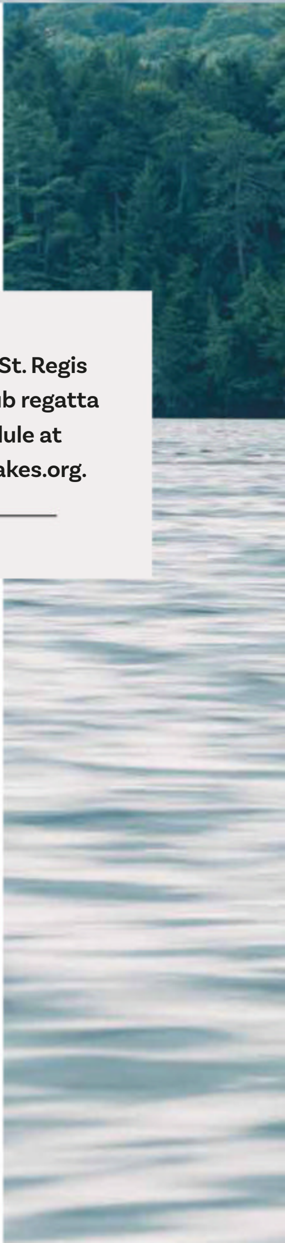
Idems, with their massive sails aloft—Egyptian cotton only; synthetics are prohibited—are a sight to behold. The word *idem* means "identical" in Latin, and Clinton Crane's approach was to create a one-design class. For a fleet like this to work on a wild little lake, he wrote in his 1952 autobiography, *Clinton Crane's Yachting Memories*, the sloops "must be relatively fast as compared to other boats of similar size and must be fun to sail. Otherwise, although the racing may be even between different members of the class, the class is doomed to failure."

Idems, as Crane hoped, have endured. Today, John Thain, commodore of the St. Regis Yacht Club and an Idem owner, says that in some cases, generations of families sail their boats, but "the most successful crews are those that are consistent, work together as a team and know what their jobs are."

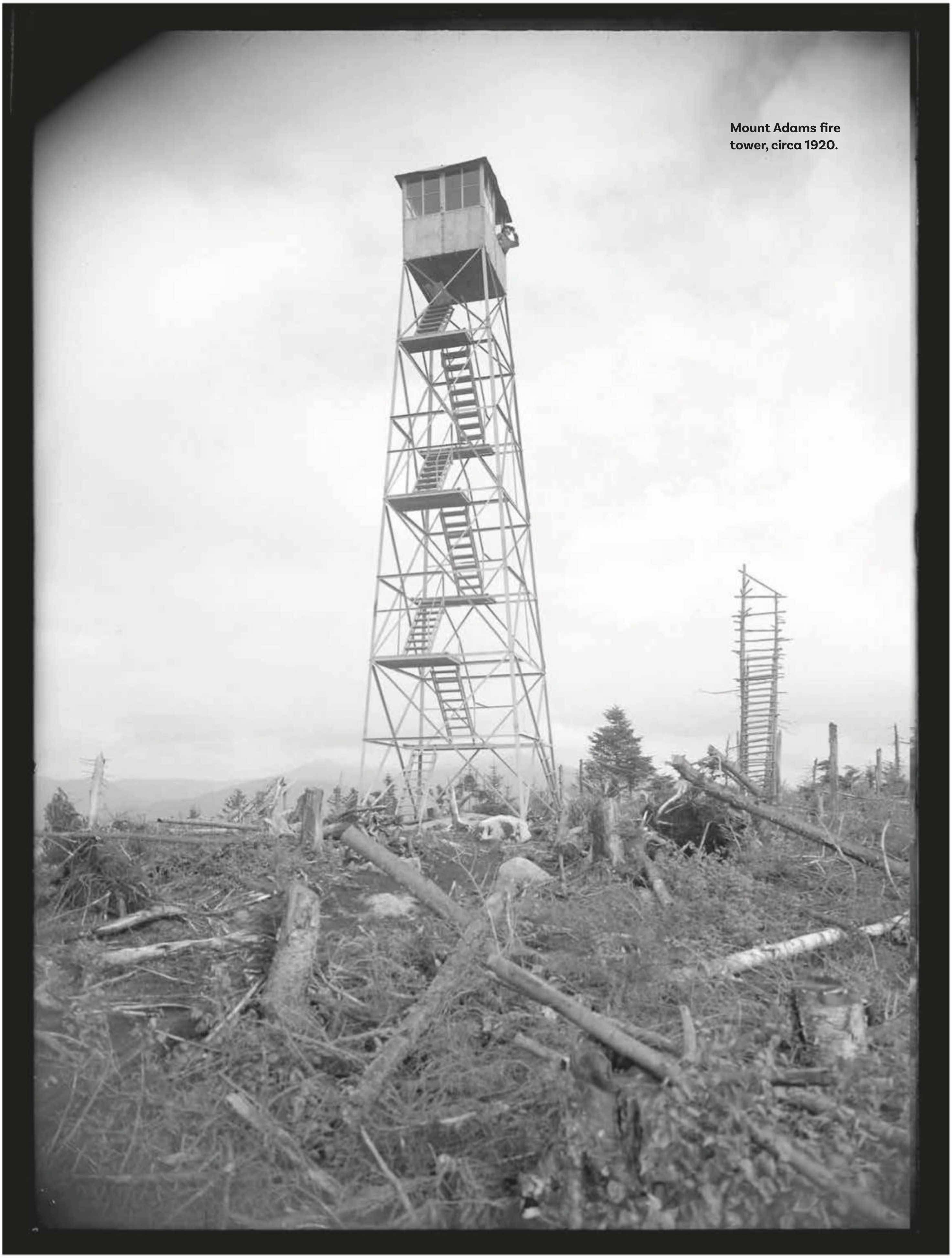
The sailing experience has much to do with knowledge of these waters, of decade after decade navigating the same course. He says it also "depends on the wind," which tends to be "very shifty." Islands and the mountains that cradle Upper St. Regis can affect the direction and intensity of a gust. "These boats have a lot of sail—when it's windy they can go very fast.

"Being the custodian of something that's made of wood and is more than 120 years old is a challenge, but also an honor," says Thain. "It's meaningful, but also a lot of fun." *—Annie Stoltie*

See the St. Regis Yacht Club regatta schedule at stregislakes.org.



Because the lake's islands and surrounding mountains affect the direction and intensity of the wind, sailing an Idem requires understanding the landscape.



Mount Adams fire tower, circa 1920.

Hot Topic

Fire's past, present and future impact on the Adirondack landscape

FIRE HAS BOTH regenerative and destructive powers, a delicate balance that has forever affected this place. Throughout time, lightning strikes have sparked blazes that burn and heal the landscape. Haudenosaunee and Algonquin peoples practiced ecological management with controlled fires to make way for berries and to open space for grazing wildlife. In the early 20th century, great infernos caused by locomotives and human carelessness torched a million acres of Adirondack forestland, about the size of Franklin County and more square miles than three Lake Champlains. By the 1960s, drought brought daunting, dangerous work for forest rangers, who saved our woods and protected lives by dumping water and flame retardants from the air.

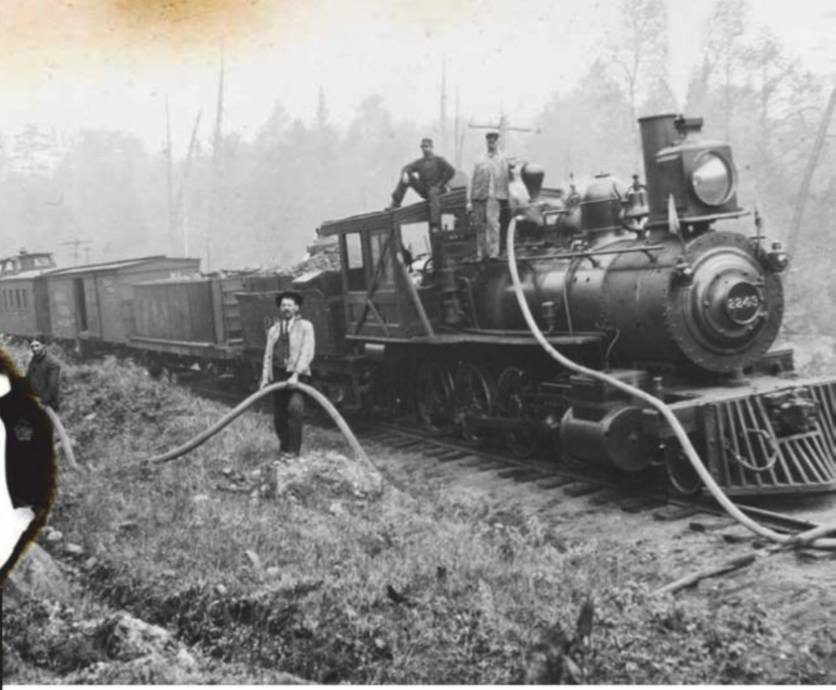
But what about today? Will the extreme heat, drought and wind—byproducts of our planet's climate crisis—that contribute to wildfires across our country and lands up north be part of our future? And what of our tiny park communities, where aging, dwindling year-round populations mean struggling volunteer fire departments? If a home or camp catches fire, will someone show up to help put out the flames?

Read on for an exploration of fire's impact on the Adirondacks' past, present and future.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

The Big Burn

BY SANDRA WEBER



New York Central Railroad fire service engine and an exhausted firefighter, circa 1920.

FIREFIGHTER PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES. FIRE SERVICE ENGINE PHOTOGRAPH FROM ADIRONDACK EXPERIENCE

IN THE EARLY SPRING of 1903 there were no signs of trouble, no indications of the drought and fires that would ravage the Adirondacks. That March, Lake Champlain was at its highest level in memory. Two months later the water would drop 33 inches.

A few fires early in 1903 were quickly extinguished. Still, the April rains did not come, and dry winds raked the region. Fires sprang up from Lake Placid and Elizabethtown to Long Lake, Old Forge, Cranberry Lake, Tupper Lake and the St. Regis Lakes.

Fires were common near railroad lines in the wake of trains. By the end of April, burns had broken out along the tracks of the New York Central, the Chateaugay, the New York & Ottawa, and the Saranac & Lake Placid Railroads. Fire warden C. W. Rowe reported that the engines on the Delaware & Hudson Railroad set fires on the mountain south of Port Kent nearly every day.

A law specified that locomotives used in the woods must have steel netting or screens to prevent sparks from escaping. Railroad authorities knew of the danger but continued to run engines without screens. The only penalty was a hundred-dollar fine—not much of a deterrent for wealthy railroad companies.

However, trains were not the only problem. Laws forbade farmers to kindle fallow fields between April 1 and June 1 because of dry conditions. Not everyone obeyed—fallow burns were the second leading cause of forest fires in 1903. Wardens fined 56 offenders and collected more than $1,700 in fines.

Fire wardens used a variety of methods to control the fires. Surface fires were stopped by raking the leaf litter. The crews used water if they could find it. At Inlet, men carried water by hand until they were able to connect a pipeline and turn a one-and-a-half-inch stream of water on the burning· ground. The manager at Dr. W. Seward Webb's Nehasane preserve, in Hamilton County, resorted to extraordinary measures: he invited scientist and inventor Carl E. Myers to bring his "explosive balloon" to cause artificial precipitation.

At times men set backfires or plowed ditches to keep fires from spreading. They also used shovels to dig trenches. Dry duff made it necessary to dig the trench from one- to four-feet-wide and down to the mineral soil. In St. Huberts, 250 men dug a trench to encircle the town completely and save it.

Women helped too. A. N. Skiff, from Onchiota, wrote, "The women fought two nights, all night long, and waded brooks clear to their knees. I say they fought fire better than the men, they were that scared, and were more thorough in putting it out than the men were."

Dangerous conditions continued in the month of May, which was the driest in 77 years. The wardens and firefighters worked 15 hours a day, week after week, sometimes camping in the woods near the fires. Reports of fires kept coming. The Hurd sawmill at Tupper Lake, the largest in the country when it was erected, caught fire and was destroyed. Chazy Lake, Standish, Schuyler Falls and Keene all reported fires. The top of St. Regis Mountain was burning; at Dannemora crews were keeping watch on the prison.

Areas far removed from the flames witnessed the effects. Smoke from the Adirondacks settled over New York City and caused a "yellow day." *The New York Times* reported that grass and flowers in Central Park "looked as if they had been daubed with yellow paint, owing to the peculiar reflection due to the smoke.” In Lake George, ash fell like a heavy snowfall, and in Utica, noted the *Times*, “the sun did not cast a shadow, but hung like a red ball in the heavens.”

By June, the situation grew desperate. In North Elba, brush left from lumbering made good fuel, and fires swept over 10,000 acres in one afternoon. At Heart Lake, Henry Van Hoevenberg’s Adirondack Lodge and 14 other buildings were destroyed. Along the shore of Heart Lake lay fish that had been cooked to death. The same thing had happened in the inlet of Big Moose Lake, where the fierce heat of a fire raised the water temperature. The road between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake was filled with snakes, rabbits, porcupines and deer that had been scared out of the blazing woods.

Relief came on June 7 as rain fell on the region. Hundreds of men dropped their tools that day; the six weeks of firefighting were over. By the time the fires were extinguished, about 464,000 acres had burned in the Adirondack forest.

As a result of the fires, authorities tried unsuccessfully to persuade railroad companies to convert their wood- and coal-burning locomotives to oil. Loggers and residents were asked to help prevent the careless and criminal use of fire. H. M. Suter, of the United States Department of Agriculture, felt improvements to the fire patrol system must be made, saying, “should another long drought occur, the State would be powerless under present methods against fire to prevent a repetition of the calamity.” Despite Suter’s warnings, new methods and improvements to fire services did not come fast enough. When another drought hit in 1908, fires raged through the region, leveling more than 600,000 acres. Not until 1909 were measures taken, including the establishment of a paid fire patrol and the construction of mountaintop observation towers.

Excerpted from “The Big Burn” (April 2003). Learn more about historic blazes at Fires of the High Peaks, a new exhibit at the Adirondack History Museum (www.adkhistorycenter.org), in Elizabethtown.

Up in the Air

BY LOU CURTH

RECENTLY, ON A TRIP to Glens Falls, I drove to the Warren County Airport to visit a place that sticks in my memory. I discovered a chain-link fence that barred me from driving to the grassy field that, in the 1960s, had been the epicenter of the New York State Conservation Department’s air operations in response to high wildfire danger. Back then, airport security was more relaxed, and our trucks and personnel moved freely in and out to provide the services needed by the pilots and their aircraft. As I stood there, my mind scrolled back to those times and to the people I met when I was a newly hired forest ranger.

The danger of wildfire had been made frighteningly clear on April 26, 1962. On that day sparks from a welding torch in West Glens Falls ignited dry grass, becoming a wildfire that burned hundreds of acres of land and destroyed more than a dozen homes before it was contained. Media coverage of this North Country disaster was widespread, even reaching Paul Smith’s College, where I was midway through my forestry studies. Most important, the West Glens Falls fire focused the attention of New York’s governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller, and other prominent leaders, who were determined to prevent a reoccurrence of disasters like this one.

To achieve greater wildfire protection, funding allocations were beefed up to hire personnel and provide other resources needed by New York State’s long-established forest ranger force and by the state’s local volunteer fire departments. Educating people of all ages about fire safety became an important first line of defense against wildfires. Later, the nationally known Smokey Bear fire prevention campaign and similar fire safety programs would become high priorities.

It would fall upon the Conservation Department’s newly appointed superintendent of forest fire control, Fred W. Oettinger, to implement the changes approved by the Rockefeller administration. At the top of the list was the need to fast-track the hiring of replacements for retiring World War II–era forest rangers. The new rangers would be selected from a cadre of young, well-trained graduates of the SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry Ranger

School and Paul Smith's College.

Next would come much needed radio communication upgrades for all rangers and fire towers (still used to spot smoke and flames), purchases of more trucks, firefighting pumps and hand tools to be stockpiled for use on future fires. A training officer was assigned to implement year-round programs for rangers, fire wardens and volunteer fire departments, and to implement the programs needed to teach fire prevention and safety. Lastly, the Warren County Airport was designated as the staging area for department aircraft involved in water and fire-retardant drops and other assistance to rangers combating wildfires anywhere in the Adirondack region.

None of this was known to me on the cold January day in 1964 when I began my career as forest ranger for the Queensbury-Moreau district.

My first calls came in March, along with hands-on experience in firefighting. When April arrived, my fire calls were more frequent and harder to extinguish as drought conditions worsened. Owen Kane, the retired ranger I replaced, warned me that this district was a high fire area, and 1964 proved him correct. But what would be different for me was soon made clear by my boss, district ranger George Stewart. He informed me that when I wasn't busy fighting wildfires, I might be needed to assist with aircraft operations at the Warren County Airport.

The Conservation Department acquired its first airplane for fire detection in 1931. Additional aircraft were purchased during the 1940s and in the '50s, when the first airborne water drops on fires were tried.

In 1957, I got a firsthand look at a water drop, while working as a teenage firefighter on Kipp Mountain, in northern Warren County. Unfortunately, the pilot miscalculated, and the water landed on a very irate and wet bulldozer operator.

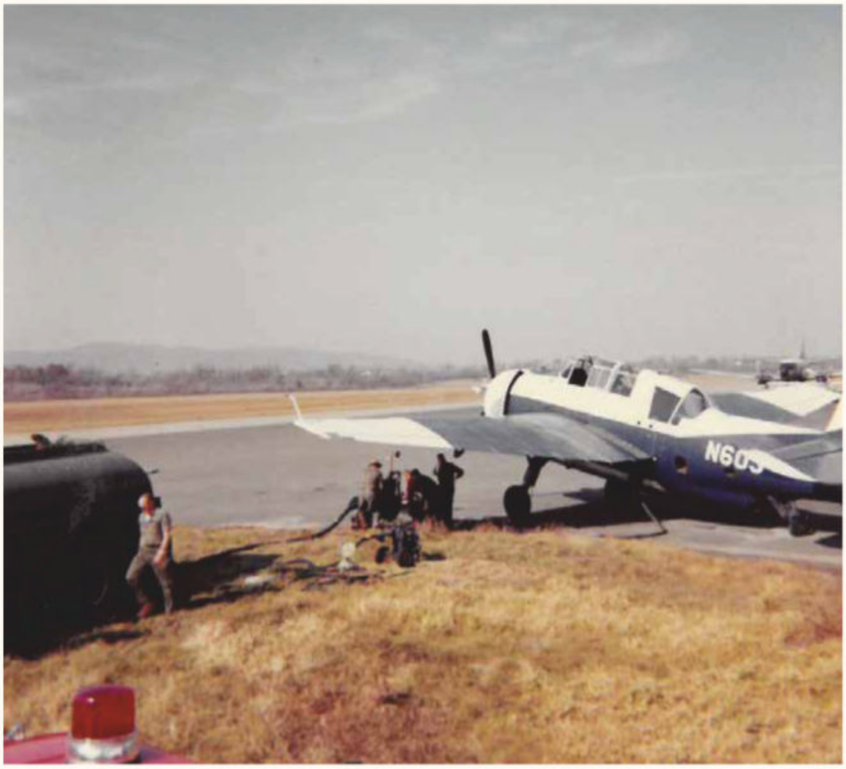
By the time the droughts of the 1960s arrived, the department's use of aircraft had expanded to include a World War II–era TBM "Avenger" torpedo bomber retrofitted with a 650-gallon tank for dropping water or fire retardant. This aircraft, and pilot Amsden "Ace" Howland, became mainstays of our air operations at Warren County Airport, supporting ranger crews battling wildfires throughout the Adirondacks.

During spring of 1964, the airport was a beehive of activity as rangers improvised a network of tanks, portable pumps and quick-couple hoses capable of mixing fire retardants with water delivered by the department's tank trucks. The resulting slurry was pumped into the aircraft drop tank as the pilot prepared for the next takeoff.

The following year brought no letup in drought conditions or in wildfire activity. More rangers arrived to help construct a storage building for the bags of red Phos-Chek powder and other fire-suppressant chemicals, powdered asbestos, "wet water" detergent and other materials we used in our air operations. (Questions about the safety of these chemicals remain unanswered.)

As long as the drought continued, our ability to contain wildfires remained a major concern. Governor Rockefeller issued three temporary woods closure proclamations during the 1960s in response to the danger of wildfire. At the airport, the department leased an additional airplane—a twin-engine Chase cargo plane that could air-drop payloads of 1,500 gallons on wildfires. Later still, the Conservation Department acquired a Bell 204B helicopter. The chopper was also valuable for ranger search-and-rescue missions, as well as for equipment and water drops on hard-to-reach fires.

When the drought finally eased, concern over the wildfire danger of the 1960s began to fade, and our air operations at Warren County Airport started to wind down. Meanwhile, each passing year saw more woodlands and open spaces in Queensbury and Moreau replaced by expanding residential and commercial development. Over time, the names and faces of rangers also changed as peoples' lives evolved, and other concerns came into focus.



The Conservation Department's World War II–era TBM "Avenger" torpedo bomber, retrofitted with a 650-gallon tank for dropping water and fire retardant, 1964.

TBM PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LOU CURTH. MOOSE POND SHORELINE PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNATHAN ESPER

The Future of Wildfires

BY CURT STAGER

AS MORE WILDFIRES have scorched much of the western United States and Canada in recent years, smoke from those fires has also clouded the air downwind in the Northeast. For some local residents of a certain age, the acrid haze reminds us of the Bad Old Days of acid rain and smog. It also makes us wonder what the future might hold in terms of fires here in the heavily forested Adirondacks.

Everyone knows that hotter, drier conditions can amplify fire risk, and both science and common sense make it clear that we're headed for a warmer future. Sophisticated climate models that focus on the North Country disagree on how much wetter or drier it will become here, but they all agree that the more heat-trapping carbon dioxide we release into the air from fossil fuels, the hotter it will become. That said, climate change is only part of the equation for anticipating fire risks; there are also factors like fuel availability and ignition sources to consider. Here's what some of my colleagues at Paul Smith's College told me recently about the future of Adirondack wildfires.

John Foppert, director of our new Institute of Forestry and a contributor to the latest *New York State Climate Impacts Assessment*, said, "Wildfires are expected to remain rare in Adirondack forests, even under the most extreme climate scenarios. It's been getting wetter overall here, which presents real challenges in terms of management and operations, but not from wildfire."

Chris Sheach, who teaches in our Disaster Management and Response program, concurs. "The main fire risk here is usually in spring, but it's only partly due to climatic conditions." He said that it normally has more to do with the lack of shading and sheltering by forest canopies before the leaves open up, which allows more sunlight and wind to reach the ground. "The more direct sun exposure and wind action tends to dry out the dead leaves and broken winter branches on the forest floor, even when the soil beneath them is still damp from snowmelt. That makes it easier to start accidental ground fires in the duff from campsites or backyard burn-piles." There is also less greenery overall then to help resist fires and wind, all good reasons why the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation announces burn bans in spring even when the weather hasn't been particularly dry.

Forestry professor Justin Waskiewicz had a more historical perspective. "There were major wildfires here a century ago, but that had a lot to do with buildups of flammable logging-slash from land clearance and careless harvesting practices. There were also more ignition sources from the smokestacks of trains, unregulated uses of open fires, and such."

The woods themselves have changed since then in ways that make them less prone to burning. Waskiewicz pointed out that Adirondack forests are now richer in maples and other leafy deciduous species that don't become tinderboxes as easily as the resinous pines and other conifers that dominate out West.

So there you have it. We can't be sure what the future holds for the Adirondacks and fire-enhancing droughts, but at least our forest communities and the ways in which we currently manage them offer a helpful measure of protection against fire risk as this region continues to warm. If only we could say the same about the smoke from those wildfires upwind of us.

Curt Stager is a professor of natural sciences at Paul Smith's College and author of *Still Waters: The Secret World of Lakes.*

The Legacy of Fire

BY ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

WHEN I WAS A KID, I thought I had discovered the perfect answer to the "What do you want to be when you grow up?" question. The long hike up the mountain, the snug little cabin and the crowning glory of a fire tower with a 360-degree view, plus an occasional hiker stopping by for a visit, seemed like an idyllic life. The network of fire observation towers was an important part of land stewardship in the Adirondacks, but by the time I was old enough to sign up, fire spotting was no longer a viable career. About 20 fire towers remain, nostalgic reminders of a time when our woodlands were frequently ablaze. They mark the story of a changing forest and changing culture.

From a summit today you may see the land's memory of fire in fall's flame-yellow swaths of paper birch foliage. On a trail you may hear it amid trembling aspen, leaves all aflutter. These stands are markedly different from the mixed forest of beech, yellow birch, maple and assorted conifers that blankets most of the region.

Many of these paper birch and aspen forests originated over a century ago, when forest fires raced across the Adirondacks, creating the perfect habitat for these fast growing pioneers. Composed of a single species, uniform in age and size, the first generation forest after a fire is filled with light and has a parklike feel with plenty of open space between the high canopy and the sparse forest floor. You can still find these stands on White Birch Ridge near Indian Lake or Kempshall and Blueberry Mountains in the town of Long Lake.

The fire towers were much needed after irresponsible logging left the landscape covered with "slash," spruce and pine limbs that were left behind and dried to a crisp in the sun. The new logging railroads traveling from Old Forge to Lake Clear threw a shower of sparks over the tinderbox of slash, igniting huge blazes. Columns of smoke rising from a cut-over landscape were a common sight. Between 1888 and 1914 more than a million acres of timber were destroyed; many of the stands of birch and aspen we see today arose from the great

FOREST FIRE AND RAQUETTE LAKE FIRE DEPARTMENT PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

fires of 1903 and 1908. From the 1920s through the 1960s the fire-fighting capacity in the Adirondacks was exemplary—and necessary. But, as Jerry Jenkins points out in the *Adirondack Atlas*, "forest regrowth is its own fire protection." As the forests recovered from logging and burning, natural processes were reestablished that inhibit fire.

THE ASBESTOS FOREST

The mature, undisturbed forest of the Adirondacks, composed of conifers and the hardwood trio of beech-birch-maple, has been described as "the asbestos forest." Forest ecologists attribute its low flammability to precipitation that is evenly distributed throughout the year and deep snow cover that keeps the soils moist. The well-known Adirondack cloud cover and the thick, multilevel canopy keep sun from drying the forest floor, so potential fuels decay into spongy humus, which also inhibits fire. Millennia of leaf fall has created a blanket of moist organic duff that soaks up water. Even if a burn did get started, natural barriers to fire movement such as rivers, bogs and wetlands prevent spreading. The "natural fire return interval" has been estimated at more than 1,000 years for our pre-settlement forest; in contrast, a dry chaparral forest out West is 30 to 130 years for the same cycle.

Here, so-called "natural ignition" is very uncommon, accounting for fewer than five percent of our fires. The region is justly famous for the rumbling summer thunderstorms that produce numerous lightning strikes. However, our thunderstorms are usually accompanied by a deluge of rain. Lightning can strike an old pine snag, and embers protected in the dry, crumbly trunk can gain strength and emerge as a fire—as in the case of a 1913 blaze near Keene Valley—but this is rare.

Most forest fires in the Adirondacks today are human caused, frequently started as debris fires that get out of control around dwellings. Unattended campfires are also a significant cause. September 2015's Crowfoot fire near Crane Pond originated from an abandoned campfire and burned 130 acres.

Human-caused fire is not a new phenomenon for the Adirondacks: The region was used extensively by both Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Algonquin peoples as a hunting and fishing ground as well as for berry picking. Their traditional ecological knowledge of land management included the skillful use of controlled burning, which helped maintain thriving blueberry populations and attracted deer to meadows with lush young grass. This small-scale periodic burning increased the local biodiversity as well as the food supply.

DESTRUCTION AND CREATION

The Haudenosaunee creation story, which is rich in lessons of how humans came to be and might be in the future, includes two important figures, the twin grandsons of Skywoman, who were known as Flint and Sapling. These mythic boys of very different natures are not thought of as good or bad, but as representing the twin forces of creation and destruction at work in the world. The job of humans is understanding how to keep those forces in balance.

Those two elements are embodied in fire, which can be both creative and destructive. The effects of fire are influenced by the intensity or heat of the burn, its size and its frequency, which in turn are influenced by its location. A very hot fire, fed by dry, windy conditions and ample fuel, can be devastating, burning not only the trees but the soil itself, leaving behind a sterile wasteland. The drought-prone pinelands of the Rockefeller estate at Bay Pond in Franklin County remain today a barren of lichens and blueberries with little forest regeneration, nearly as gray today as the ash left by the fire more than a century ago. More recently, in 1999, a campfire on Noonmark Mountain ignited an intense duff fire, which burned away the soil.

In contrast, small low-intensity fires here give rise to berries and biodiversity; they produce habitat for an array of animals not adapted to the deep forest. They are creative fires, renewing the landscape by resetting the clock of ecological succession. The dominant canopy is removed, making way for a sequence of other species, but eventually the forest returns. By maintaining a mosaic of patches of forest in different developmental stages, from the early pioneer communities to old-growth forest, the landscape is constantly renewed.

The nature and location of the forest itself can influence the likelihood and the impact of a fire. The Crowfoot fire occurred in a primarily oak woodland; the southern exposure had dried the forest floor. Oak leaves don't decay very quickly and accumulate in loose, rustling drifts that can carry a ground fire. In contrast, the wet blanket of decomposing maple leaves inhibits fire. Fortunately, oak trees are resistant to ground fire (while maples are not), so the net effect of the fire is to perpetuate the less-common oak forest and the habitats and food supply it provides. David Winchell, of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), commented that the fire removed accumulated blowdown and will increase habitat for deer, bears, squirrels and other wildlife that depend on acorns. Nonetheless, the DEC policy is that all wildland fires in the Adirondacks will be suppressed.

Fire is not the only, nor the most important, source of the natural disturbances that create diversity here. Windstorms are the most prevalent form of creative destruction, yielding forest patches from the size of a single tree windfall to the vast swaths cut by the 1995 derecho. In the absence of fire, pioneer species in the Adirondacks rely primarily on such disturbances for their regeneration.

THE TWILIGHT OF PIONEER TREES

Paper birch is an iconic tree of the North Woods, from its traditional use by indigenous peoples for lodges, containers, medicine and the marvel of birch bark canoes. Native peoples of the Great Lakes used controlled burns to ensure a steady supply of this all-important material. But this keystone species is disappearing from the Adirondacks as the fires disappear, because paper birch flourishes on burned-over ground. Paper birch seeds are tiny and can only germinate on newly exposed soil. Eroded banks and sandy shorelines can provide small patches of birch habitat, but if you look for large

| *Continued on page 97*

Chimney Brush
RLFD
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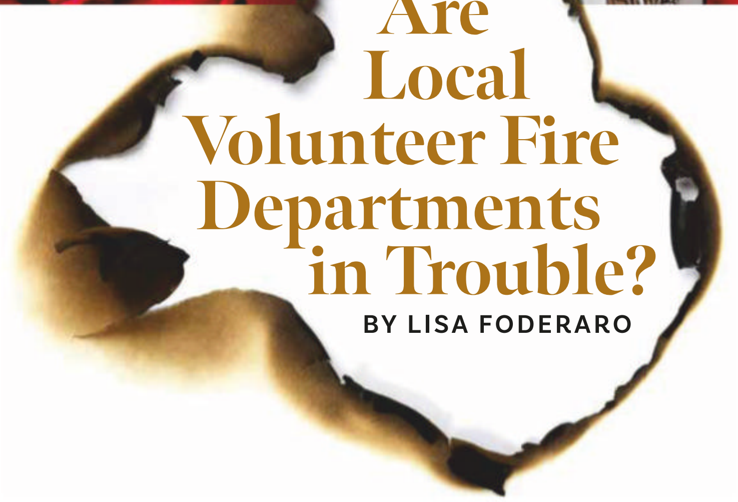


Are Local Volunteer Fire Departments in Trouble?

BY LISA FODERARO

WHEN BILL TANSEY MOVED with his family to Keene Valley a dozen years ago, it wasn't long before Rusty Hall showed up at his doorstep. Hall, the longtime fire chief with a salt-and-pepper mustache and no-nonsense manner, was—and is—on a perpetual quest to recruit volunteers. "He knocked on my door and said, 'Hey, do you want to join, and I said, 'Sure.'"

But the obligation was a bit more than Tansey, the assistant county attorney for Essex County, bargained for. First there was the training. He had to attend three sessions a week for three months, both in a classroom and in the field, where he learned to climb ladders and shoot hoses. "It was a huge commitment," he recalled.

Then came the calls. Structure fires aren't common, but the all-volunteer fire department also responds to car accidents, gas leaks, hiker rescues, wildfires, and downed power lines. Firefighters are also expected to accompany EMTs in case someone needs help being carried down a staircase. "There are some choice words at one in the morning when the siren goes off, but once you get your jeans on and your turnout gear, it's actually a lot of fun," he said at a chili fundraiser held at the Keene firehouse. "It's an adrenaline rush—the smell, the noise. When you first show up, it's 'Is everybody safe?' If they're safe, is there any property we can protect? Sometimes you can, and it makes you feel good. I've run into people on the street and get a big hug. I'm like, 'Why are you hugging me?'"

But fewer people these days are willing to rise in the inky darkness to investigate a propane leak or fall. Like towns and hamlets across the Adirondacks, Keene Valley has seen its roster of fire volunteers plummet in the past 20 years. While a few larger municipalities, like Lake Placid, are partially paid, almost all rely entirely on volunteers. Between the sparse year-round populations, aging demographics, and demands of work and family, volunteering in general is a tough sell—and the requirements and responsibilities of firefighting are even more so.

Another challenge across the Adirondacks is the number of second homeowners. By definition, they are not here 24/7 to respond to emergency calls. Keene Valley has a higher proportion of weekenders than most towns. Hall, who has been with the department for 52 years, estimated that less than half of Keene Valley's population is full-time. He recently came across a firefighter roster from 2002, with 43 names. The current list has just 15.

"I don't want to sound like a grumpy old man—or my father—by saying 'People today…,' but there is definitely a culture change here," Hall said. "The fact that there are so many second homes and now Airbnbs, that's made it difficult for young people to afford to live here. And we are coming to a crisis because we are aging out. I'm 67 and a lot of us are in their mid-60s."

In recent years, the Keene Valley Fire Department and Keene Volunteer Fire Department have resorted to automatic mutual aid for the more serious incidents, due to their dwindling numbers. That means a volunteer in Keene gets an alert the same time the volunteer in Keene Valley does, regardless of whose fire district the emergency occurs in. (Fire districts are able to levy taxes, but that revenue pays for fire trucks and gear, as well as insurance and other expenses, not salaries.)

The default to mutual aid has helped somewhat. But in late 2024, only five volunteers showed up between the two departments for a house fire in Keene. It was a Saturday before Christmas. "The National Fire Protection Association says it takes a minimum of 15 firefighters to do a single family structure safely and appropriately," Hall noted. "We eventually put out the fire, but it was a total loss. No one was hurt—the father and son were able to get out. But the outcome might have been different if we had more volunteers at that fire."

Jody Whitney is another fire-service lifer. The recently retired fire chief of the Keene department has logged 42 years, 30 as fire chief, and is still a volunteer. "I started at 18 as a volunteer," he shared. "I was born and raised here. My father was a member. I joined because my first cousin was an assistant chief and he asked me to join. It's always been part of life."

In early April, Keene held a fundraiser featuring a cornhole tournament and a chili contest. As laughter ricocheted off the walls of the cavernous house, Whitney showed me his current roster. Of the 20 names on the list, only half were actively involved. "Years ago, we'd have 30 people show up for a major incident," he added. "Now you're lucky if you get 10."

The problem is not unique to the Adirondacks. The firefighters Association of the State of New York (FASNY) says that the terror attacks of September 11 yielded an uptick in volunteering. But that was followed by a long decline. In 2007, for instance, FASNY estimated the number of volunteers statewide at around 120,000. Today, the number stands somewhere between 75,000 and 80,000.

"For generations the volunteer fire services relied on legacy recruiting, and by that I mean your grandfather was a firefighter, and your father and all your uncles, and 'Dammit, you're coming to the firehouse whether you like it or not,'" said John D'Alessandro, association secretary for FASNY and a volunteer firefighter himself in Saratoga County. "We can't rely on that anymore because young people have different challenges and perspectives on community. They are much more likely to move away for opportunity."

In 2011, after holding a series of focus groups, FASNY launched a statewide campaign to attract new volunteers. The first goal was to educate people about the importance of volunteering. Many New Yorkers are under the impression that all firefighters are paid. In fact, 98 percent of the fire departments across the state are all-volunteer. Secondly, the association sought to address the natural concern about potential danger.

"If you want to become a structural firefighter, it will take a good amount of time," D'Alessandro allowed. "But if you want to do bookkeeping or fundraising or even cleaning up the equipment at the house when a truck returns from a call, we can use all of that help. You don't have to be the one going to the emergency."

In the years after the campaign, many departments started to see a rise in new recruits. "It stopped the hemorrhaging," he said. "We are still losing people but we have slowed the decline."

Ultimately, D'Alessandro said, state lawmakers need to make a number of changes to reverse the trends. Otherwise, he said, more towns will face the prospect of moving to paid departments and that would be prohibitively expensive, driving property tax bills ever higher. Streamlining training requirements is a first step, he said. And the state legislature has already authorized modest tax breaks—either an income tax credit of $200 or a discount on property taxes.

FASNY has lobbied, so far without success, to push the income tax credit to $800 or $1,000. For the potential 10 percent discount on property taxes, town and village governments, as well as taxing entities like school boards and water districts, all need to enact that at the local level. Many have not. Moreover, potential volunteers in their late teens and early 20s tend not to own property, making that benefit beside the point.

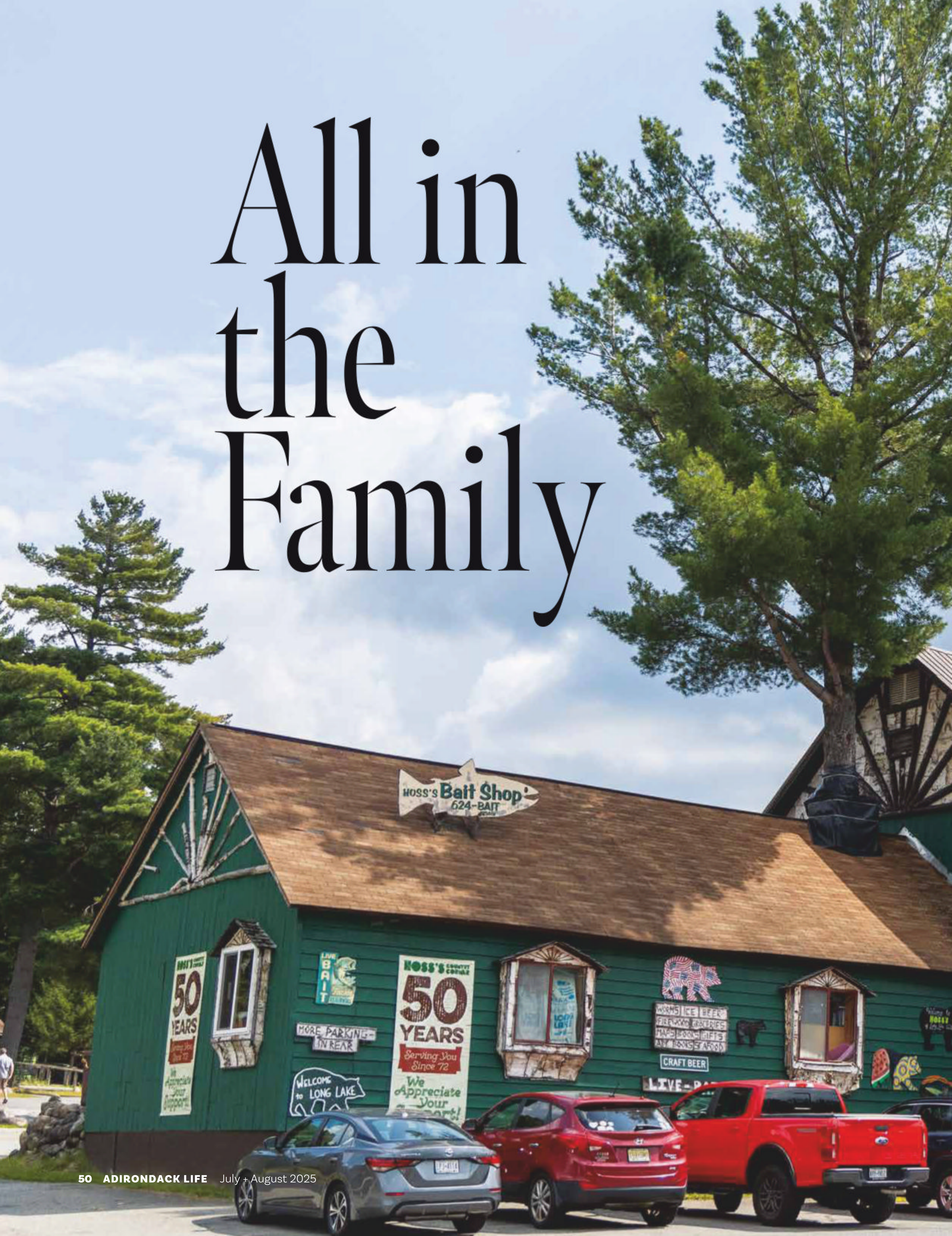
Other ideas the association is exploring include a discount on car registration fees and hunting licenses. "None of these incentives could ever compensate volunteers for the time they put in or the risk they assume," he added. "But they are a thank you from the public."

About an hour southwest of Keene, Connor Burgess, the chief of the Indian Lake Volunteer Fire Department, faces similar challenges. In theory, he has 24 volunteers, but only eight regularly show up. "I'd prefer to have 20 active," he said.

Last year, the department field-

| *Continued on page 101*

All in the Family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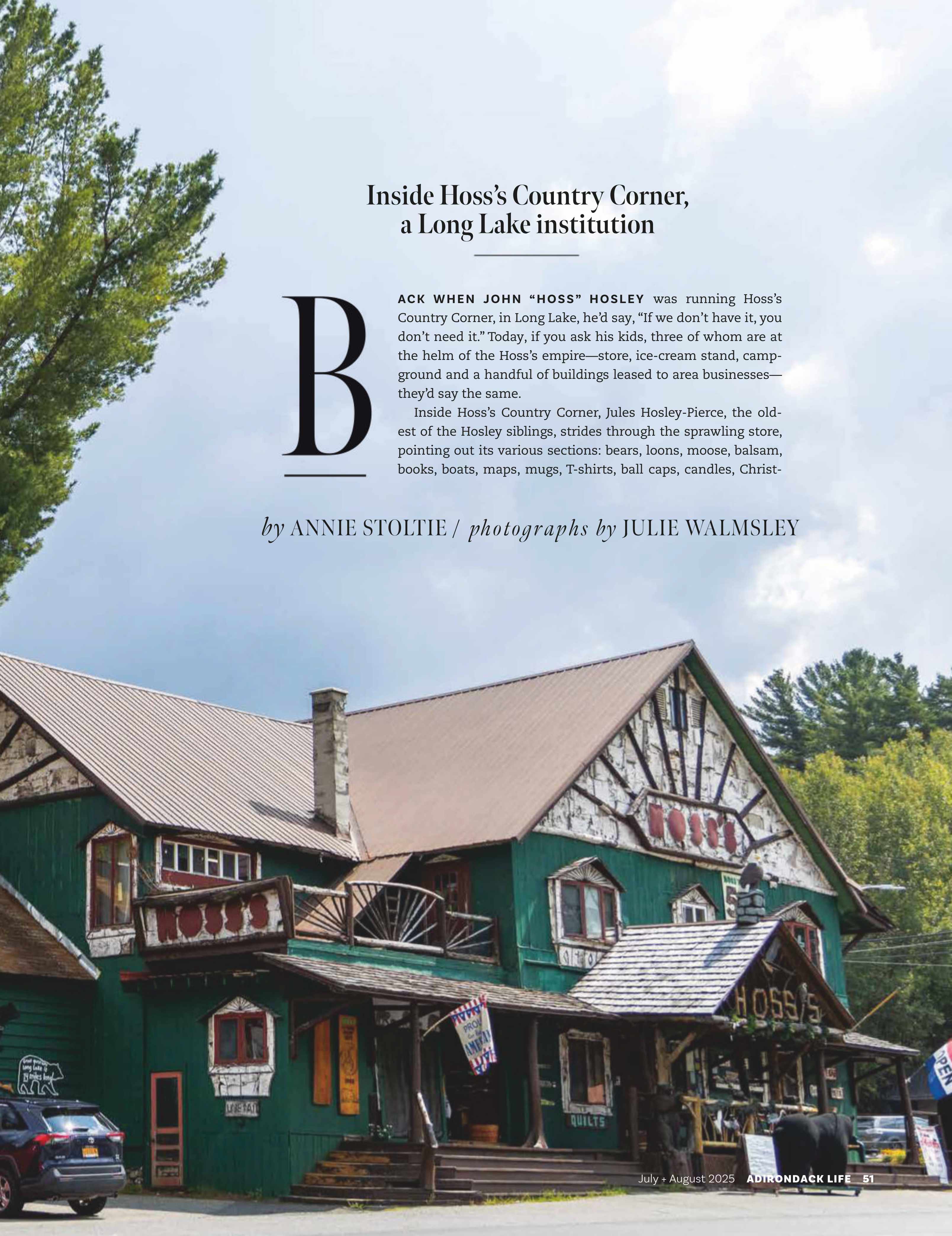
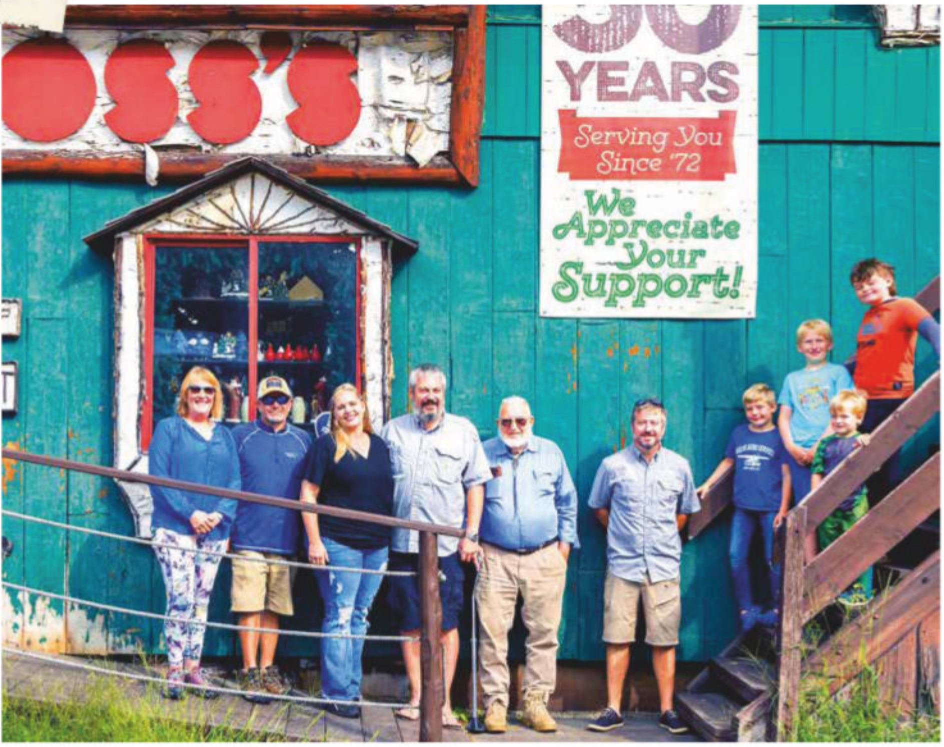


Inside Hoss's Country Corner, a Long Lake institution

BACK WHEN JOHN "HOSS" HOSLEY was running Hoss's Country Corner, in Long Lake, he'd say, "If we don't have it, you don't need it." Today, if you ask his kids, three of whom are at the helm of the Hoss's empire—store, ice-cream stand, campground and a handful of buildings leased to area businesses—they'd say the same.

Inside Hoss's Country Corner, Jules Hosley-Pierce, the oldest of the Hosley siblings, strides through the sprawling store, pointing out its various sections: bears, loons, moose, balsam, books, boats, maps, mugs, T-shirts, ball caps, candles, Christ-

by ANNIE STOLTIE / *photographs by* JULIE WALMSLEY



The Hosley family: Jules, Marty, Trisha, Nate, John "Hoss," Matthew and members of the next generation. After Hoss bought the store in 1972, his wife, Lorrie, who passed away in 2023, created a fun destination for vacationers.

mas, camping, fishing, hunting, blankets, bags, jewelry, socks, slippers, even "the zoo," a room packed with stuffed animals. But you won't find white bears. "No polar bears in the Adirondacks," says Jules. Or a Sasquatch section. "Where would I put it?"

Drive through Long Lake and you'll see Hoss's—you can't miss it. The rambling woodsy-green structure with the old white pine growing through the roof, its assortment of signs and the life-sized stuffed bears outside, dominates the corner of Routes 30 and 28N.

This busy spot was the site of Freeman's groceries and gifts, a local mainstay beginning in the 1940s. And then in 1972, after Hoss returned home from Vietnam, where he'd been a medevac pilot and received two Purple Hearts, Fred Freeman convinced him to buy his store.

It turned out that retail was a good fit. Hoss's wife, Lorrie, who passed away in 2023, ran the business, creating a fun, visually chaotic destination for vacationers. A visit to Hoss's became a tradition—as vital as a dip in the lake or a cone at Custard's Last Stand, just across the way.

These days, "we're trying to follow in my mom's good footsteps," says Jules. "She curated everything we stand for, from the work ethic to the way the store looks to the way we keep it. We all work hard at it to keep up the reputation that our family has built over these 53 years."

The "we" Jules mentions includes her dad, Hoss, now 85 but still showing up at the store, as well as her brothers Matthew and Nathan. All three siblings grew up here, left town, and then came back. (Another brother, Trip, lives in California.)

Jules's husband, Marty, and son, Austin, and Nathan's wife, Trisha, are also part of the crew, plus an additional year-round staff of four. In summer the workforce swells to 20, mostly J-1 exchange workers from Turkey and Jamaica, many of whom had parents who worked at Hoss's as young adults. (One J-1 couple invited Jules to their wedding in Serbia. "It was a blast," she says.)

In winter, if there's good snow, ice-fisherman and snowmobilers come to town. Hoss's stays open, as does Jules's brothers' Long View Lodge, a hotel/restaurant combo on Route 28N. But Memorial Day weekend into October, all of the family's endeavors come alive: Across the street, burger, espresso and

> "If we don't have it, you don't need it."

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Welcome to the Lake
Emergency Blanket
Compass
Speed Knife
TRUE BERM
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ADK

Hoss's best sellers include Adirondack-made items, including maple syrup and candy, store cheese and regional books. An expansive new fishing section with bait and tackle is also popular.

ice-cream joint The Park, with mini-golf, a playground and game room. Hoss's Country Campground, with 14 sites on the lake, where families stay season after season and make reservations years in advance. And behind Hoss's, the site of a former cabin colony, a rustic Adirondack plaza of sorts, with buildings leased to Brookside Hops & Hoagies, serving sandwiches and craft brews; The Driftwood Nook thrift store; and new this summer, artisan pizzeria and bakery Wild ADK Whisk.

Each Hosley works 60 hours a week or more. During high season the pace is go, go, go. But that's nothing new, says Jules. "We all grew up in the store, we all grew up working hard."

There are always shelves to stock and customers to please.

Back inside Hoss's, Jules points out the white pine that her dad incorporated into the building's 1984 renovation. The tree, probably about 80 years old by now, she estimates, offers woodsy charm. (Last summer it also attracted a chipmunk Jules and staff referred to as "Little Bastard," who helped himself to the store's gourmet dog treats.)

Within what seems a bottomless inventory, Hoss's stocks Adirondack-made items, the most popular of which are maple syrup and candy, store cheese and regional books. And just as Freeman's did beginning in the 1940s, the Hosleys butcher and sell "steaks and package our own salmon and other top-of-the-line meats because that's what we eat," says Jules. Still, the store evolves with the times. A recent addition is a gluten-free grocery section.

The labor is worth it. Hoss's Country Corner is "iconic," says Jules. "Our goal is to keep it going."

(You can't miss) Hoss's Country Corner (800-952-HOSS, www.hccll.com) at 1142 Main Street, in Long Lake.

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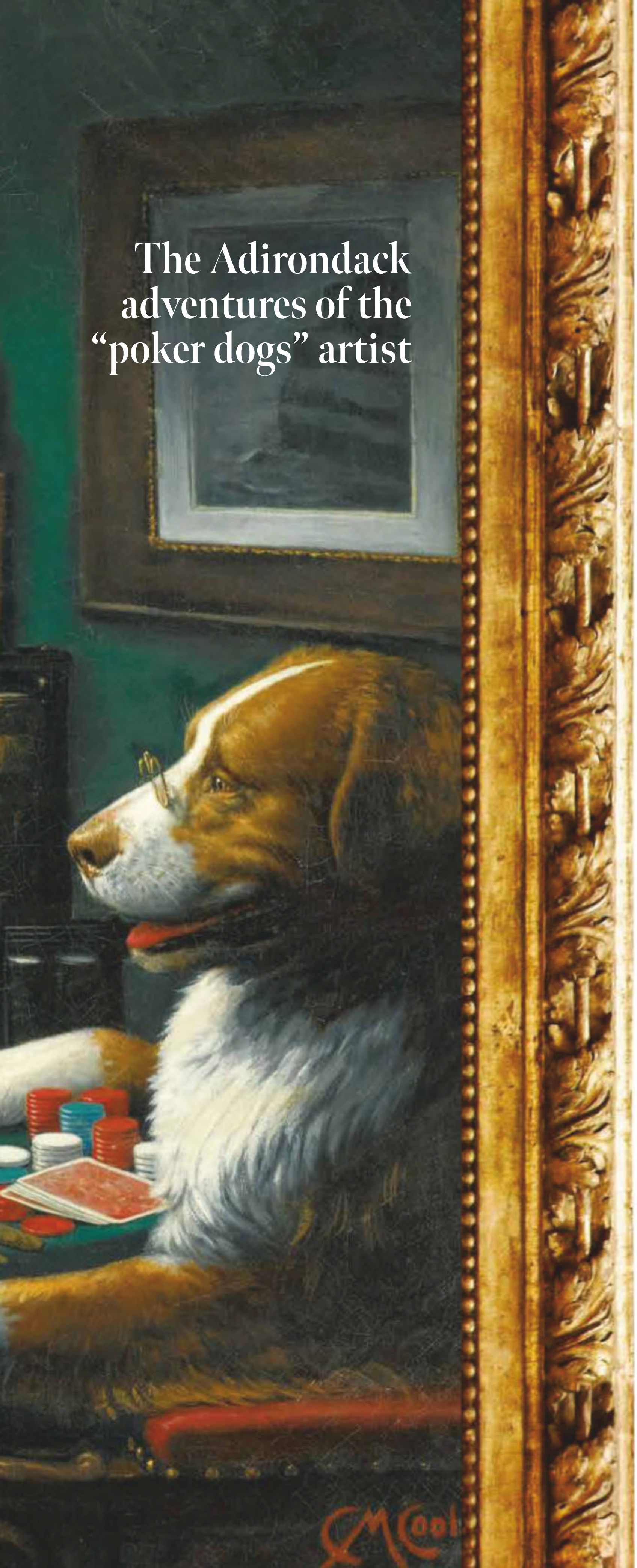


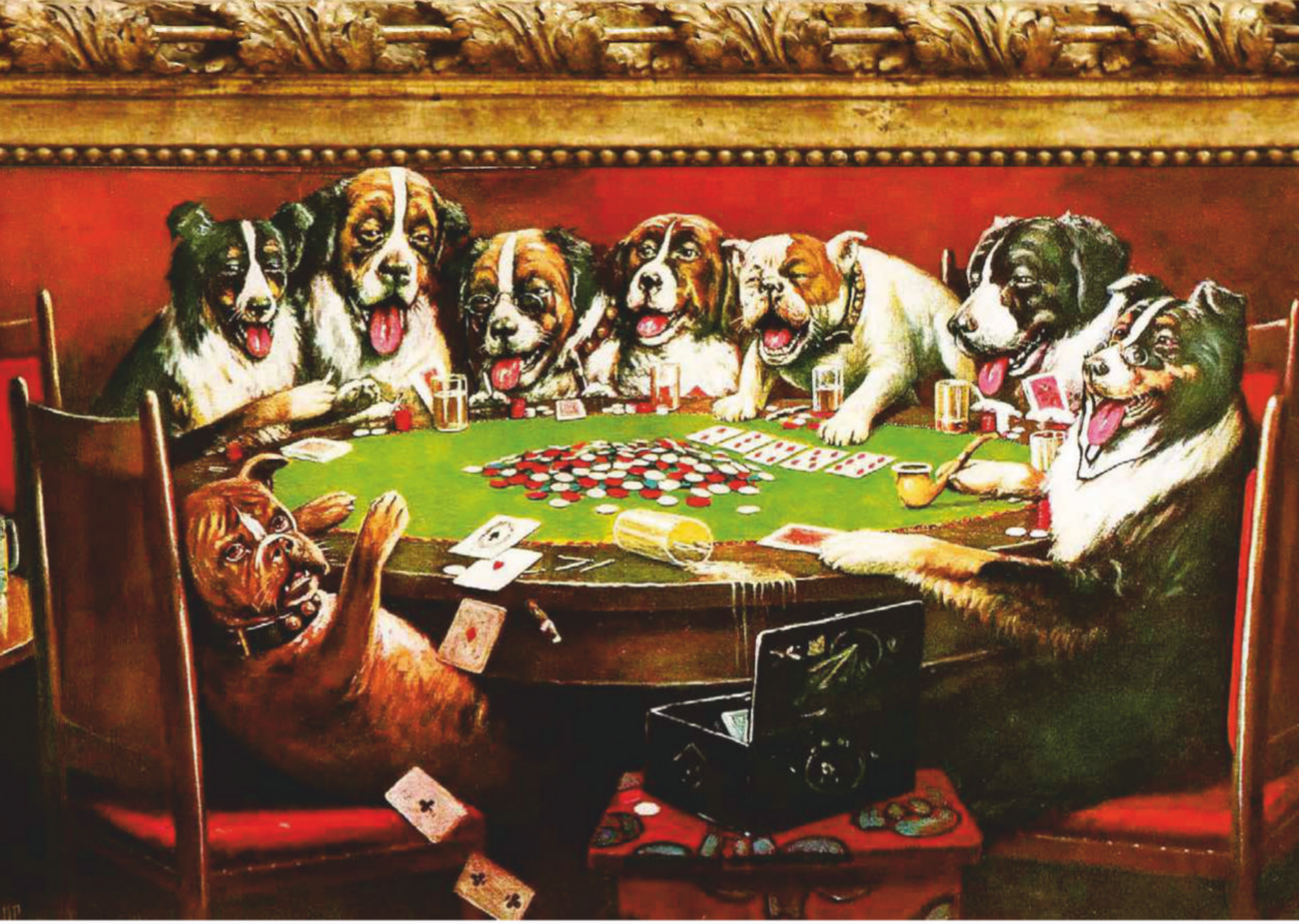
The Adirondack adventures of the "poker dogs" artist

YOU MAY NOT KNOW HIS NAME, but you know his work. Cassius Marcellus Coolidge, also known by the playful nicknames "Cash," "Kash," or "Kash Koolidge," is the artist who painted pictures of dogs playing poker and engaging in other human activities. Historically, art critics have scoffed at Coolidge's "dog" paintings as kitsch while a large popular audience regards them as quintessential Americana—a fixture of barber shops, dens and barrooms. In 2015, *Poker Game* (1894, seen at left), the first of his 18 anthropomorphic dog paintings, sold for $658,000 at a Sotheby's auction. Not bad for a guy with little formal training as a painter.

Coolidge was born in 1844, in Antwerp, New York, but spent significant stretches of his life in and around the Adirondacks. His parents were part of a wave of Quakers who settled in upstate New York during the early 19th century. Cash was the second of Nathan and Martha Coolidge's four children. The Coolidges farmed a stretch of land in Philadelphia and Antwerp, where they raised chickens and grew produce that they sold across the North Country. As a child, Cash started making pencil and crayon sketches of his surroundings, an activity he continued into his adulthood.

One of his earliest artistic endeavors as an adult came on a hunting and camping trip through the Adirondacks. Around 1870, Coolidge ventured down the Oswegatchie River with a party of four friends and his dog, Colonel, commemorating the wilderness adventure with the same kind of humor that characterized his later work. His party encountered gigantic mosquitoes, equipment malfunctions, and an overturned canoe on "Chaumont Creek" (likely the Chaumont River). He witnessed locals picking raspberries in their bare

by CLAYTON TRUTOR



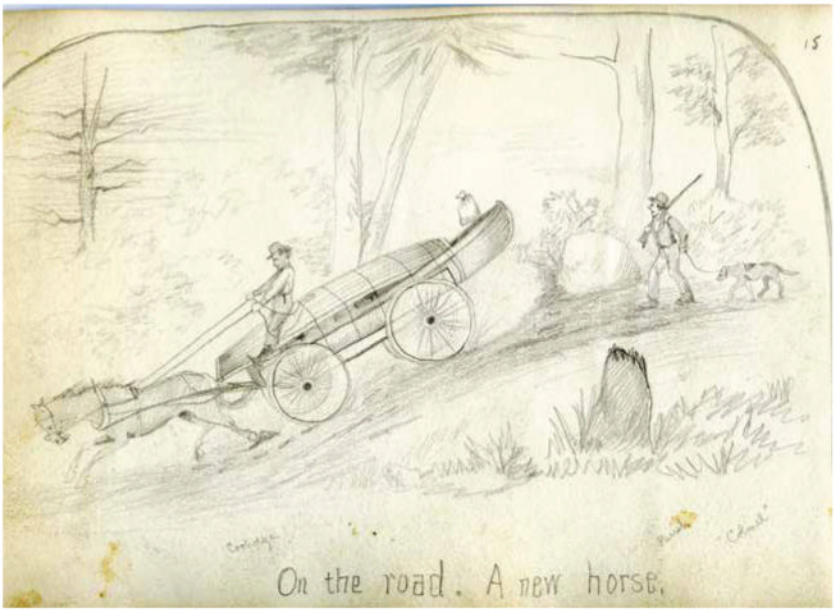
feet. Coolidge's party encountered harsh rapids and went on several "wild goose chases" in pursuit of actual geese. Their diet seems to have consisted largely of "jerked venison," and they spent their nights trying to smoke out the abundant insects that gathered around their campsites. Coolidge made 46 drawings of the expedition, which he compiled into a handmade sketchbook, now in the collection of Adirondack Experience, in Blue Mountain Lake.

Despite growing up in a prosperous farming family, Coolidge clearly yearned for more. He attended business college in Poughkeepsie before returning to Jefferson County. From there, Coolidge engaged in a wide range of businesses and purveyed a fair amount of 19th-century-style hokum. He painted signs and houses. He started drug stores in Ogdensburg, Antwerp and Rochester. He ran his own newspaper, *The Antwerp News*. He established the Bank of Antwerp. None of them lasted long.

He had more success in ventures that put his comedic and artistic skills to use. Coolidge drew cartoons for local newspapers and entertained audiences across the North Country by drawing quick portraits for tips. He earned money as a freelance writer as well. In 1873, he wrote a series of articles for rural New York newspapers about his train trip from Ogdensburg to Chicago. He then visited Europe and recounted his travels for newspapers in Watertown and Rochester.

Coolidge wrote a number of comedic operas in the 1870s and 1880s, several of which were published and performed. His most prominent opera was *King Gallinipper*, which made light of an ongoing mosquito epidemic in New York and New Jersey—a subject he got to know in detail during his Adirondack adventure. *King Gallinipper* was performed in New York and Philadelphia. His play *Crazy Billy*, a humorous take on the life of Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, was also performed in several East Coast cities.

Coolidge's first stroke of artistic genius came with "comic foregrounds"—life-sized caricatures with holes where a head should be. People would stick their faces through the hole to become the character. These forerunners to modern photo stand-ins were soon found at tourist attractions and county fairs across the country. The first and most popular of his hundreds of comic foregrounds was entitled *Fat Man in a Bathing*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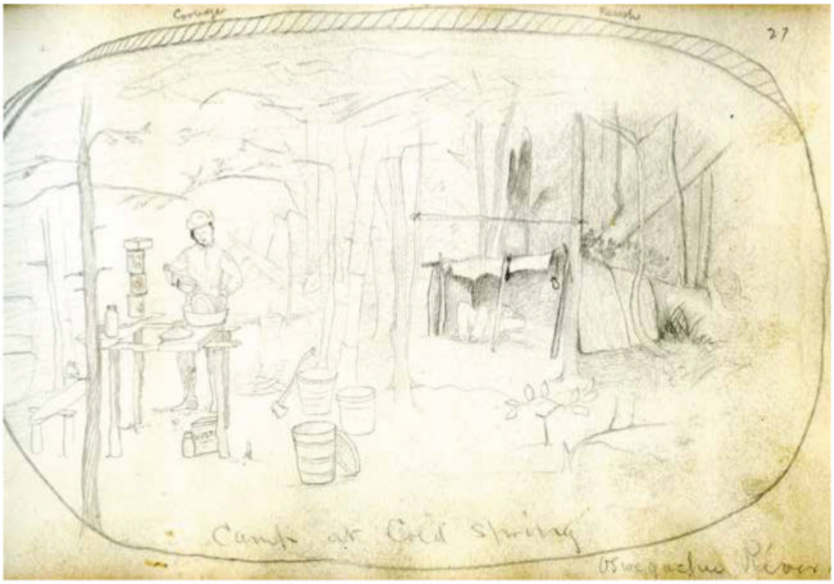
Coolidge
On the road. A new horse.



Pages from "Cash" Coolidge's sketchbook of his Adirondack adventures, circa 1870. FACING PAGE: *Poker Sympathy*, 1903. PAGES 56–57: *Poker Game*, 1894.

SKETCHES FROM ADIRONDACK EXPERIENCE. PAINTINGS FROM WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

Suit. Other popular foregrounds included mermaids and musclemen. Coolidge patented the design and created a cottage industry, selling them through mail order from his home, by then in New York City. As Coolidge's notoriety grew, he hired art students to help him paint and mail the foregrounds.

From there, Coolidge hit his stride, coming up with the idea of painting dogs with human expressions and behaviors. Initially, Coolidge painted anthropomorphic dogs for cigar companies, which put his images in their boxes and printed copies of his work as giveaways. Coolidge's aesthetics fit the spirit of late-19th-century America, the first golden age of American advertising art. By 1900, American corporations spent more than a billion dollars annually on promoting their products. Memorable images like Coolidge's dogs became valuable advertising properties.

Coolidge's first full-fledged, oil-on-canvas dog painting was *Poker Game*, which features four highly expressive St. Bernards matching wits at a card table. In 1903, Brown & Bigelow, one of the country's largest advertising firms, commissioned Coolidge to do a series of dog-themed paintings for use on calendars and other advertising products. Over the next decade, Coolidge completed 16 scenes for the firm. His first painting for Brown & Bigelow, *A Friend in Need*, shows two small dogs cheating at cards against five bigger dogs. In total, nine of his Brown & Bigelow commissions featured humorous scenes of dogs playing cards.

Other paintings examine such subjects as ballroom dancing (*New Year's Eve in Dogville*), baseball (*One to Tie Two to Win*), camping (*A Stranger in Camp*), and a Masonic initiation (*Riding the Goat*). He completed one other dog painting on his own, *Kelly Pool*, which shows dogs playing billiards. Brown & Bigelow printed hundreds of thousands of copies of his work, which has remained popular ever since.

Getting

An annual gathering of wood-fired boats on Raquette Lake

Steamy

photographs by
NANCIE BATTAGLIA

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CROWN
SHEET

Kelly Anderson, who captains one of the boats that steam around Raquette Lake, says the friendly atmosphere and clean water keep his group coming back each August.

S

STEAMBOATS, once a mainstay on central Adirondack lakes, haven't completely disappeared from these shores. Each August, about a dozen enthusiasts from around the Northeast—part of a tight-knit steamboating community—gather for a week-long "camp" on Raquette Lake, bringing along their launches. They bunk at St. William's on Long Point and tool around the lake in an assortment of boats, some built from scratch and some brought back to life.

Kelly Anderson, 63, captains *Vividus*, an open launch he purchased in 2014 and rehabbed using a converted turn-of-the-century steam-car engine and a new wood-fired boiler. He's been coming to Raquette Lake since the first steamboat meetup, in 2002, and has no plans to stop. He says it's the perfect spot for steamboating, thanks to the cooler weather—"running a steamboat on a 90-degree day is not fun"—the beautiful scenery and the "laid-back atmosphere."

Another bonus: clean water. "Many of our boats draw their boiler water directly from what they are floating in, and the quality of that water directly impacts the life and condition of the boiler," he says. "The tannin in Raquette Lake's water is a natural boiler water treatment, making the lake's water perfect for feeding boilers. It's like a spa week for our boilers!"

And then there's the ice cream—grabbing a cone at Raquette Lake Supply is a favorite outing for this crew. "The general store does a great business in ice cream when we are in town," Anderson says. Raquette Lake Supply returns the favor by donating the wood to power the group's boilers.

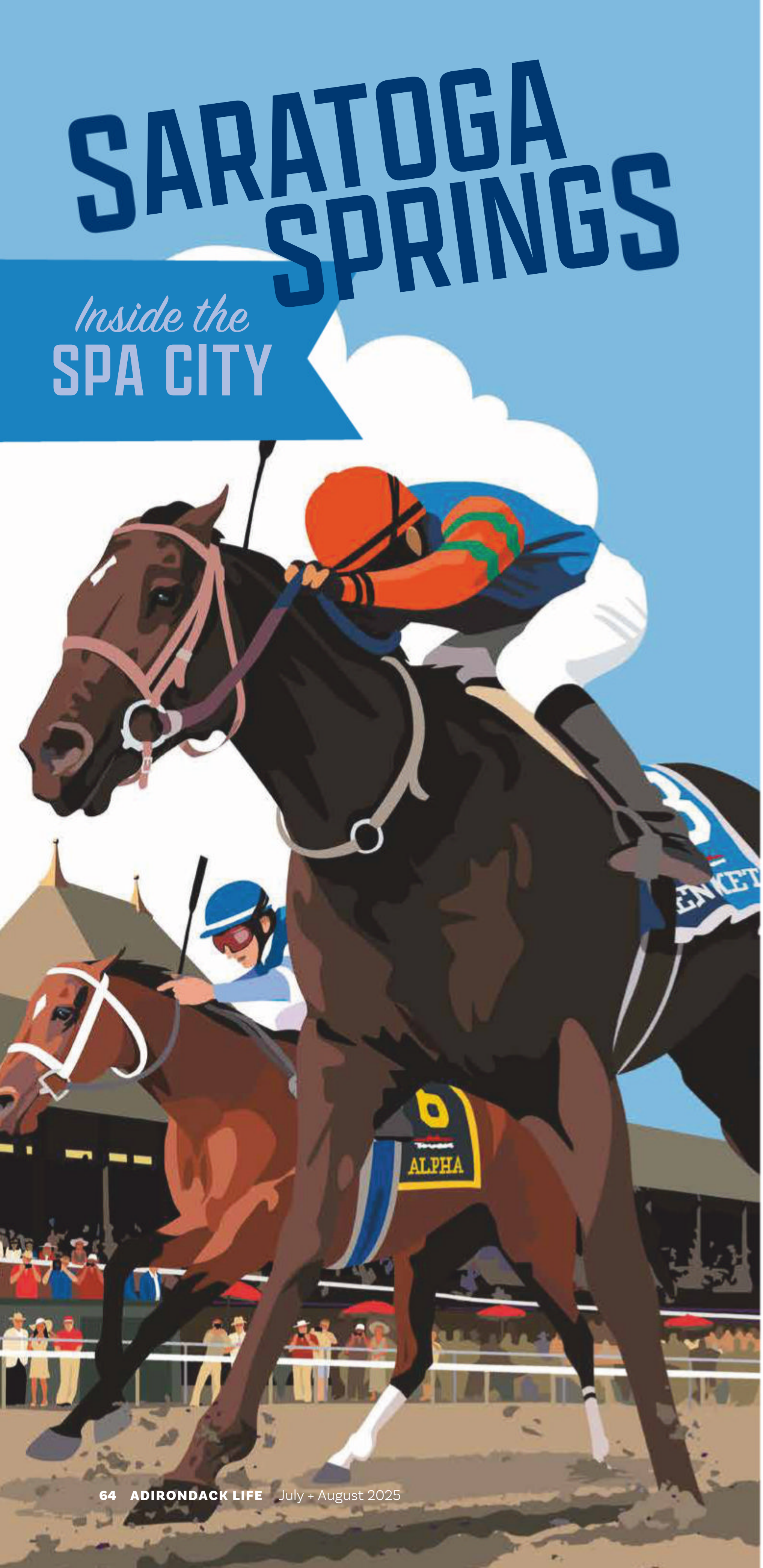
Last year two of the steamboats were trailered to Blue Mountain Lake in an effort to bring attention to the Friends of the *Tuscarora* project, a grassroots movement to restore a 125-year-old, double-decker steamboat that once carried visitors through Utowana, Eagle and Blue Mountain Lakes. To learn more about the restoration project, email contactus@tuscarorasteamboat.org.

The steamboats return to Raquette Lake August 9–15. Though "camp" is fully booked, you can talk shop with Anderson at anythingsteam@comcast.net.

—Niki Kourofsky

SARATOGA SPRINGS

Inside the SPA CITY



The Adirondacks is the ultimate playground: we're spoiled with endless opportunities for hiking, biking, paddling, and every other kind of outdoor adventure. But even surrounded by all those riches, sometimes the urge arises for an entirely different scene, a chance to trade out your ball cap and hikers for a fascinator and dancing shoes—at least for a day or two. With a prime location at the gateway to the Adirondack Park and arts and entertainment options in spades, Saratoga is a great plus-one for any summertime schedule.

HORSEPLAY

No Saratoga trip is complete without a visit to the **thoroughbred track** (267 Union Avenue, www.nyra.com/saratoga), the oldest in the country. Here, Secretariat, Seattle Slew, Man o' War and American Pharaoh made history, and today's equine contenders still thunder, neck and neck, in a quest for fame. The summer season runs July 10 to Labor Day; gates open at 11 a.m. on weekdays, 10:30 a.m. on weekends (there's no racing on Tuesdays), and races start at 1 p.m. You can catch the action from the grandstand, clubhouse or general admission area. And don't forget your hat—go to **Hatsational** haberdashery (506 Broadway or at the racetrack, www.hatsational.com) to top off your race-ready look.

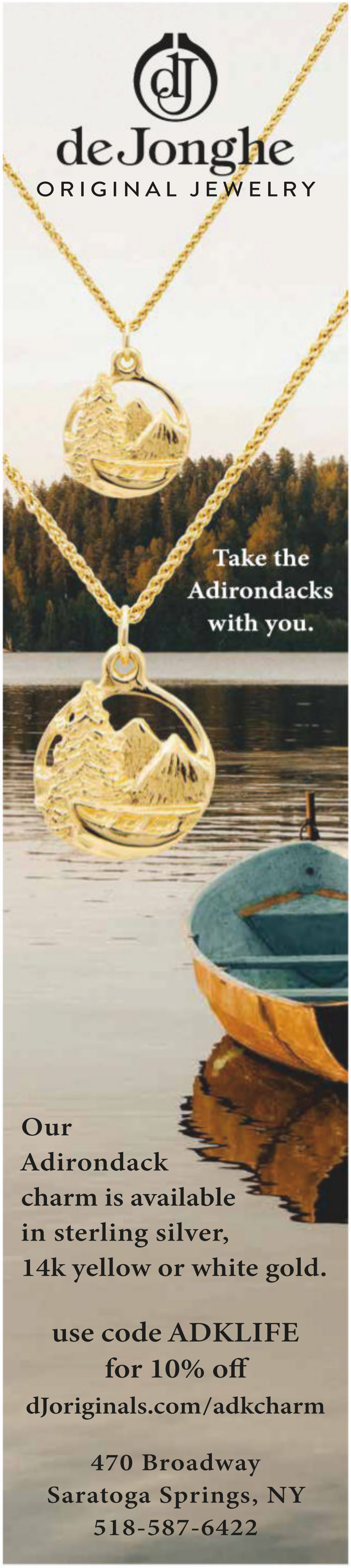
Depending on your pace and tastes, timing is everything. If you shy away from hurly-burly scenes, avoid top-tier events like the **Travers Stakes**—one of the most prestigious horse races in America, this year scheduled for August 23.

OFF TRACK

Good times in the Spa City don't stop at the racetrack. This is home to the grandmother of all folk venues, **Caffe Lena** (47 Phila Street, www.caffelena.org), a homey space that's hosted Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie and Don McLean, to name a few. The music here has never died—you can still catch an act, jam or open-mic. Some dates to remember: July 26, when Nashville-based Griffen House—who's opened for the Cranberries and John Mellencamp—brings his Americana-laced folk/rock to the stage, and August 30, a chance to hear J2B2, a quartet of bluegrass all-stars led by Grammy-winner John Jorgenson.

For a night of wine tasting, cheese plates and

Alpha and Golden Ticket **by Greg Montgomery. See more of Montgomery's iconic artwork at Spa Fine Art Gallery (376 Broadway, Suite 11), or at gregmontgomery.com.**



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dance performances, head to **Universal Preservation Hall** (25 Washington Street, www.universalpreservationhall.org)—a church turned state-of-the-art performance space—for Sip, Savor and Swirl on August 16. Or take your pick of pleasures at the **Saratoga Performing Arts Center** (108 Avenue of the Pines, spac.org), which hosts a busy season of blockbuster shows, from classical and ballet performances to the hottest tickets in alternative rock and outlaw country.

In this town, not all the stars are on stage—some are parked at the Saratoga Spa State Park's old water-bottling plant, now the **Saratoga Automobile Museum** (110 Avenue of the Pines, www.saratogaautomuseum.org). Catch The Corvette Story, showcasing vehicles on loan from the GM Heritage Collection, through October 26. The museum's Porsche Car Show, featuring vintage and modern models, happens July 19.

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO YUM

Let's face it: one of the biggest draws in Saratoga is food, and the choices here are head-spinning. There are the spots everybody talks about, such as **Ostertia Danny** (26 Henry Street, www.osteriadanny.com) for out-of-this-world Italian, or **Hamlet & Ghost** (24 Caroline Street, www.hamletandghost.com) to sip some creative cocktails—try their signature Gin-Gin Fizz!

The Merc (430 Broadway, www.themercsaratoga.com) is the go-to for boozy brunches, and **Cantina** (408 Broadway, www.cantinasaratoga.com) is a good bet for late-night tacos or a nightcap at their rooftop bar.

But there are calmer alternatives. Try **Scallions** (44 Lake Street, scallionsrestaurant.com) for gourmet, vegetarian-friendly fare in a vibrant space, or **Three Vines Bistro** (32 Congress Street, www.threevinesbistro.com)—tucked in an off-Broadway plaza—with some of the best meatballs around. For grab-and-go, you can't beat **Fat Paulie's Deli & Bagels** (92 Congress Street, www.fatpaulies.com), with mozz made fresh daily.

Can't decide? Sign up for the **Taste of Saratoga Springs** food tour (saratogaspringsfoodtours.com), a stroll through town with tastings and tales of regional history, offered every Saturday through October.

PILLOW TALK

There's no end to options for lodging—from historic to hip—right in the heart of the action. But if you're looking for some downtime at the end of a busy day, stretch out at **Brookmere** (500 Union Avenue, www.hotelbrookmere.com), a new hotel set on 10 acres near Saratoga Lake.

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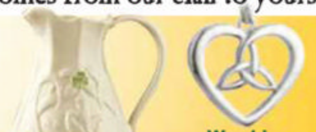

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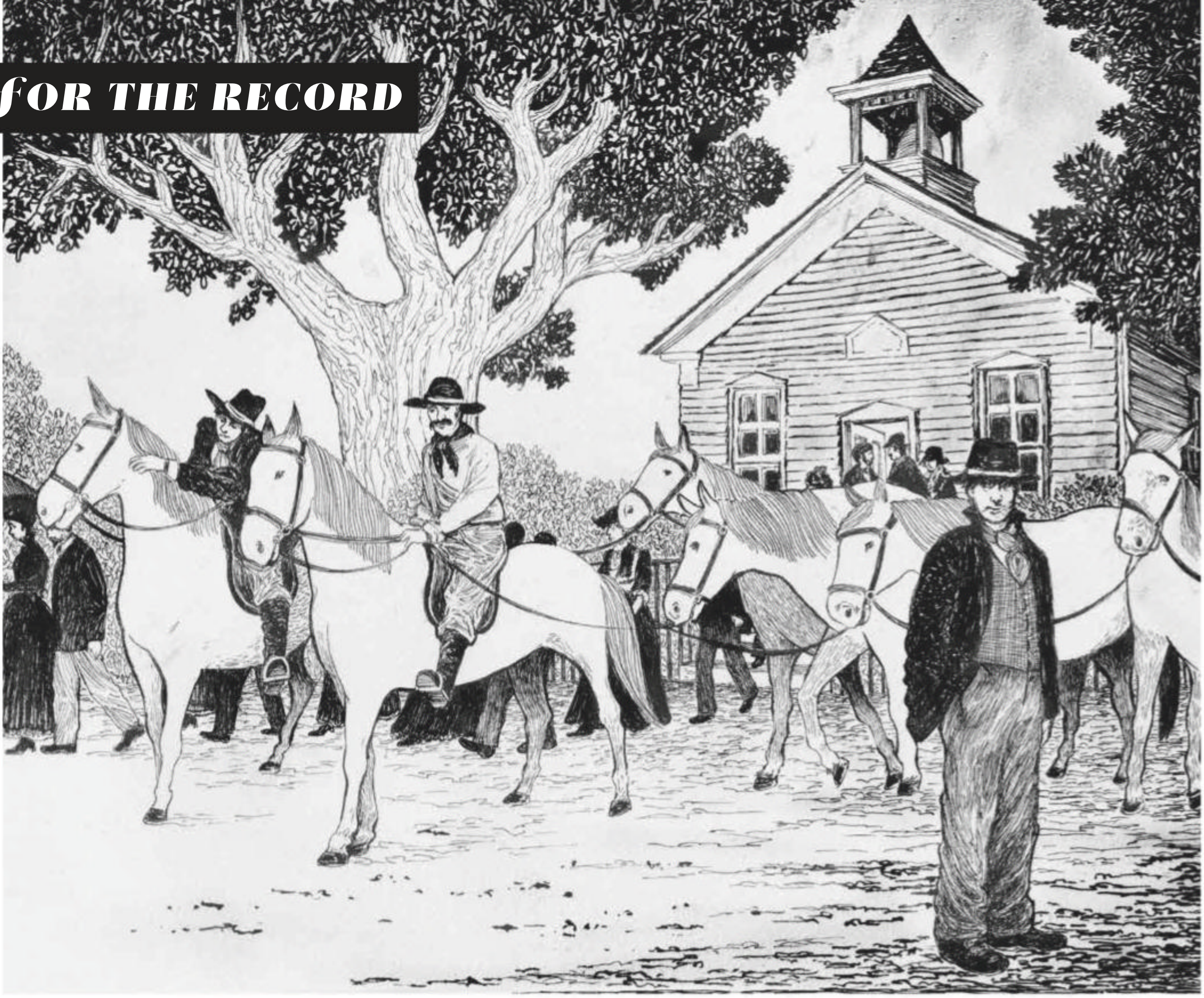

ILLUSTRATION BY ROHAN EASON

Murder Most Foul

When a sensational crime rocked a tiny Franklin County town

BY LARRY GOOLEY

James Madison Bickford spotted his victim after church services on a June Sunday, 1853.

In the Adirondack wilds of 1853, a remarkable drama played out in northern Franklin County, rocking the sparsely populated region and becoming one of the area's biggest crime stories of the 1800s.

It began in the unlikeliest of locations—at Sunday church services in the schoolhouse at Thomasville, otherwise known as Dickinson Center, about 15 miles southwest of Malone. When the session ended, folks dawdled and visited in the customary fashion. Among the attendees that day was 21-year-old James Madison Bickford, who mingled with friends in the school entryway before stepping outside.

At that moment, two strangers were passing by on horseback, with each man leading a string of three other horses. Bickford took notice, and any warm, residual glow from community prayer was extinguished, replaced by a plan he admittedly concocted on the spot—to follow the two men, murder them and steal their money. About an hour later, Bickford returned from his nearby home to attend the second church session, sitting piously at attention, but all the while fine-tuning a heartless plan.

After church, he asked a younger brother, Benton, to accompany him on horseback to a good fishing area east of their home. At a farm less than two miles away, they found 17-year-old Thomas Cook and asked him to ride along, purportedly to visit Cook's father's house to see some newborn calves. Down the road a bit, Bickford sent his younger brother home and related his plot to Cook, suggesting a partnership. By robbing the men, killing them and stealing their horses, they could markedly improve their own financial situation. Cook agreed.

Stopping at the Cook residence, they secured a gun, but the importance of remaining inconspicuous apparently escaped them. Following the Port Kent and Hopkinton Turnpike, they were hardly secretive, making a total of nine stops while interacting with folks along the way, including three unsuccessful attempts to borrow a second firearm. They visited the home of Henry Meacham, who was married to Cook's sister, and took supper at the Bentley House at Deer River, where they chatted with three men. During the conversation, Bickford asked if any horses had passed through recently, and if so, where they were headed. The answer was yes, two men with several horses were stopping overnight at Ladd's place, near the beginning of the forest passage known as the 50 Mile Woods, a heavily forested section of the Northwest Bay Road.

At about midnight, Bickford and Cook arrived at Ladd's, made certain the horses they were pursuing were in the barn, and began plotting how to waylay the two men. Entering the 50 Mile Woods at daybreak, they selected a sharp turn down the road as a good place to attack their targets. Bickford had their only gun and Cook carried a hatchet. Together they finalized a plan: as the men slowed for the turn, Bickford would shoot both with a single bullet. If it worked, Cook was to grab the horses before they ran off. If only one man was shot, Cook would use the hatchet to prevent the second man from leaving while Bickford reloaded. But if necessary, Cook would use the hatchet to kill.

The men—Wright Van Tassell and John Secor, both from New Castle in Westchester County—arrived soon after, and a gunshot echoed through the woods as Secor suddenly fell from his mount. Any semblance to the boys' poorly devised plan ended there. Secor and Van Tassell had been riding about 15 feet apart, so they couldn't be taken with one shot—an unlikely notion to begin with. Bickford began walking toward Van Tassell, who yelled, "What the devil do you mean in shooting like that?" or words to that effect. Bickford stepped off the road to reload, but Van

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Tassell reversed direction and escaped. Cook, having fallen in the woods, failed to stop him. Bickford then took a watch and pocketbook from Secor's motionless form before they departed the scene.

Heading west, they entered the woods and paralleled the road, at some point hiding the gun and hatchet beneath a log. Arriving at what today is Route 30, they turned north for Malone to ride the train home, seemingly oblivious to the trail of suspicion they had left all the way from Dickinson Center.

Wright Van Tassel, meanwhile, had raced back to Ladd's and reported the attack. Several men rushed to the site and found Secor's body by the road. Without delay, a coroner's inquest was held, naming the prime suspects as James Bickford and Thomas Cook. Whether it was arrogance or imbecility, they had left plenty of clues by making so many stops, visiting with so many people, and asking questions about the two men traveling with several horses.

A manhunt began. Unbelievably, their quarry had stopped for dinner at a man's house and failed to concoct a cover story, instead telling him the truth—that they were headed for Malone to take the train. Just before sunset, two men were seen running into the woods south of that village. Guards were stationed on roads nearby, and in the morning a posse swarmed into the forest. Despite high expectations for success, searchers swept the woods and found no evidence of the fugitives.

Bickford and Cook had somehow eluded their pursuers and veered eight miles northeast to Burke. Approaching the train station there early in the morning, they encountered a friend of Bickford's. After a brief conversation that apparently included a warning against impending capture, Bickford jumped a fence and headed away from the depot. But exit points from the area had been placed under surveillance. As Cook continued walking, he was arrested by officers in wait. Seeing this, Bickford broke into a run, stopped briefly, and then ran again, but was chased down. At around noon, bells were rung in Malone and a cannon was fired, the accepted signal

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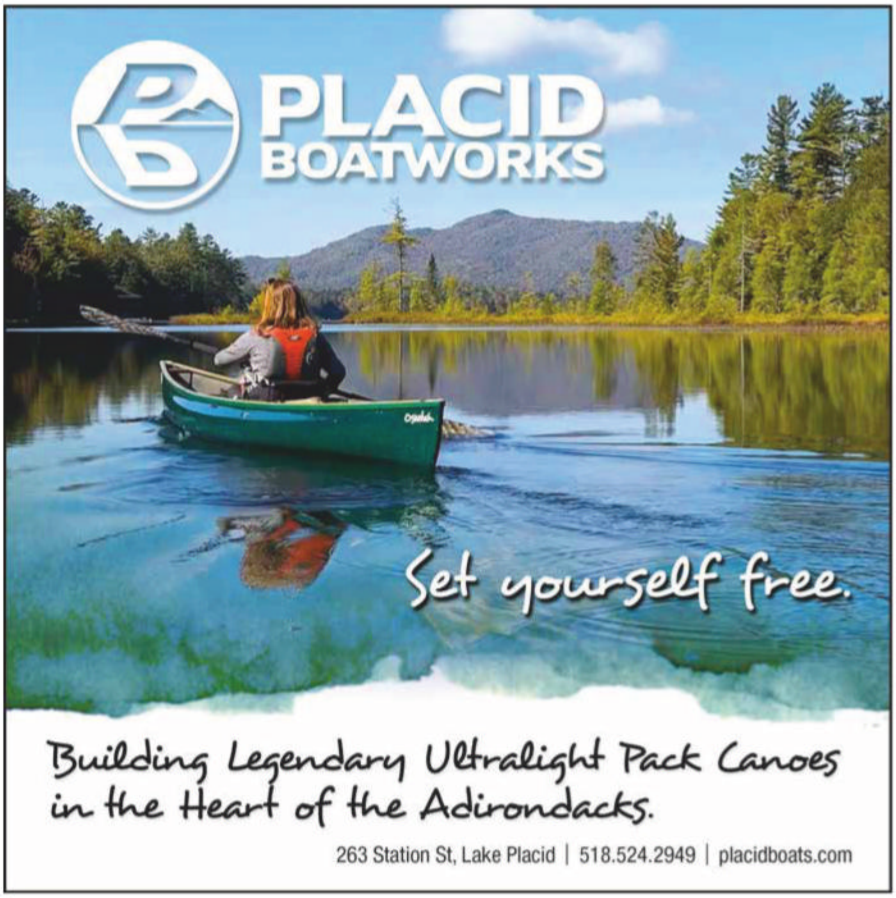
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when a search had begun or ended.

Where Bickford had briefly stopped running, officers found poorly hidden booty—the victim's watch and pocketbook, which contained $374. Pausing to hide crucial evidence allowed his easy capture and provided proof that he was the killer they sought.

Six weeks after the murder, Bickford's trial began. The evidence against him was overwhelming, including testimony from witnesses the boys had visited while pursuing their victims. Bickford's father took the stand, offering unlikely excuses on behalf of his son, but no one bought his story, including the jury, which found Bickford fully responsible.

Next came Cook, who attempted to plead guilty to avoid Bickford's fate. But for capital charges, the court required a trial, which handed Cook the same result: guilty of first-degree murder. Both were sentenced to hang on September 22, just over three months after the crime was committed.

Because Cook was younger, of less-than-average intelligence, hadn't actually harmed anyone, and had been recruited by Bickford, several residents signed a petition seeking clemency for him. Accompanying the petition was a statement made by Bickford to the county sheriff, asserting that Cook knew nothing about the shooting in advance and also wasn't responsible for the robbery. Bickford later recanted, leaving his accomplice to fend for himself, but the sheriff, who had recorded the statement, stood by it.

After counseling from a local reverend, Bickford became immersed in religion while preparing for death. Whether used as a tactic or not, the practice often aided the legal system in certifying the truth. Spiritual advisors maintained that in order to attain a satisfactory afterlife, condemned criminals had to unburden themselves of all sinful secrets. In other words, risk burning forever in hell, or confess.

A month prior to his execution date, Bickford, 22, did just that, preparing a full confession that described the crime from conception to the foiled escape attempt. Stating that, "I hope to

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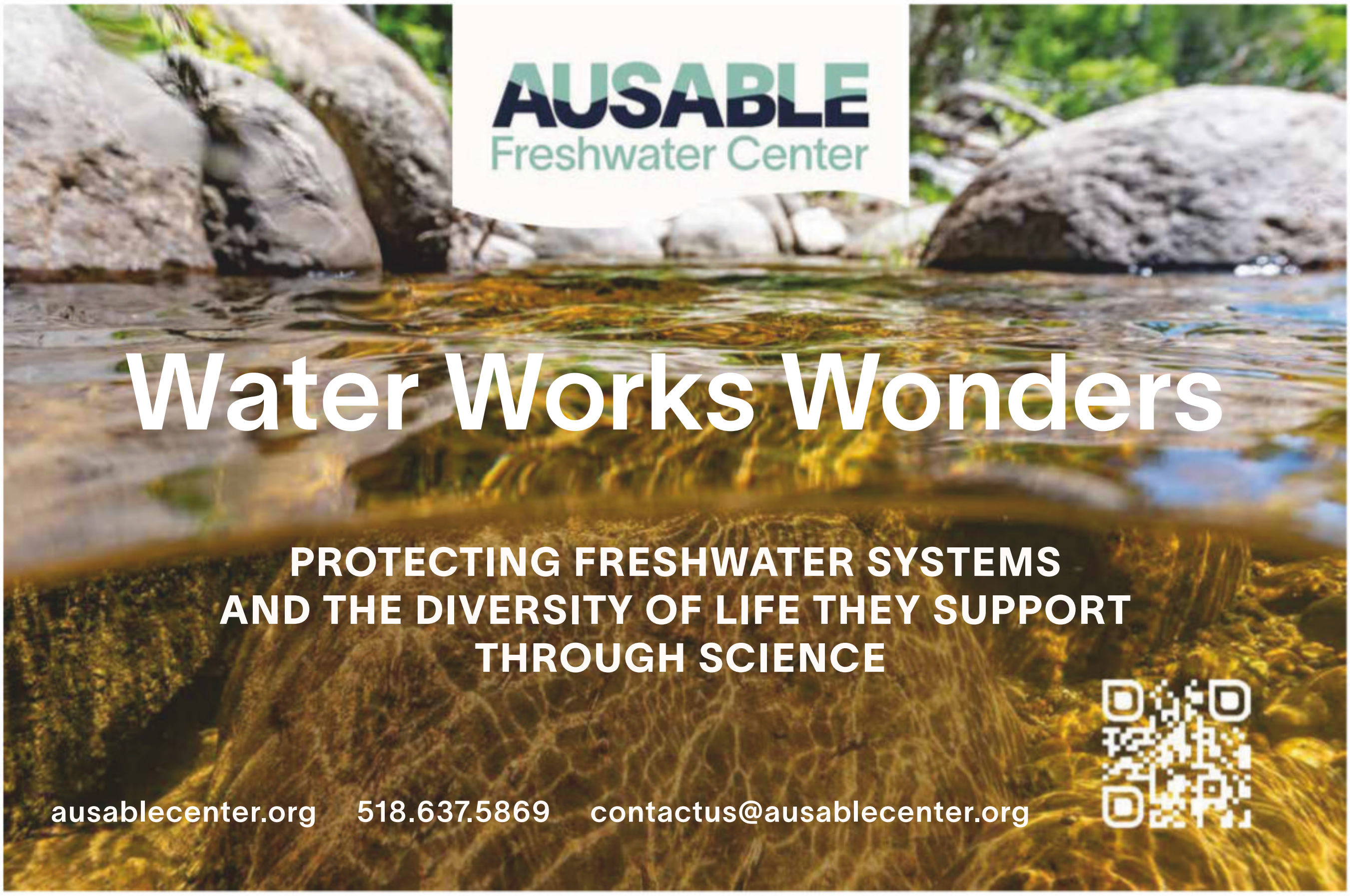

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obtain God's forgiveness of all my sins," he wrote, "I desire … now to make free confession of the particular offence for which I am condemned." He apologized profusely and accepted his fate, adding, "I have thus given a true history of this deliberately planned murder of a man who never injured me, and of whom I had no personal knowledge, together with a design of perpetrating a second murder. In God's justice, I have been convicted and am now to suffer the penalty affixed by the law."

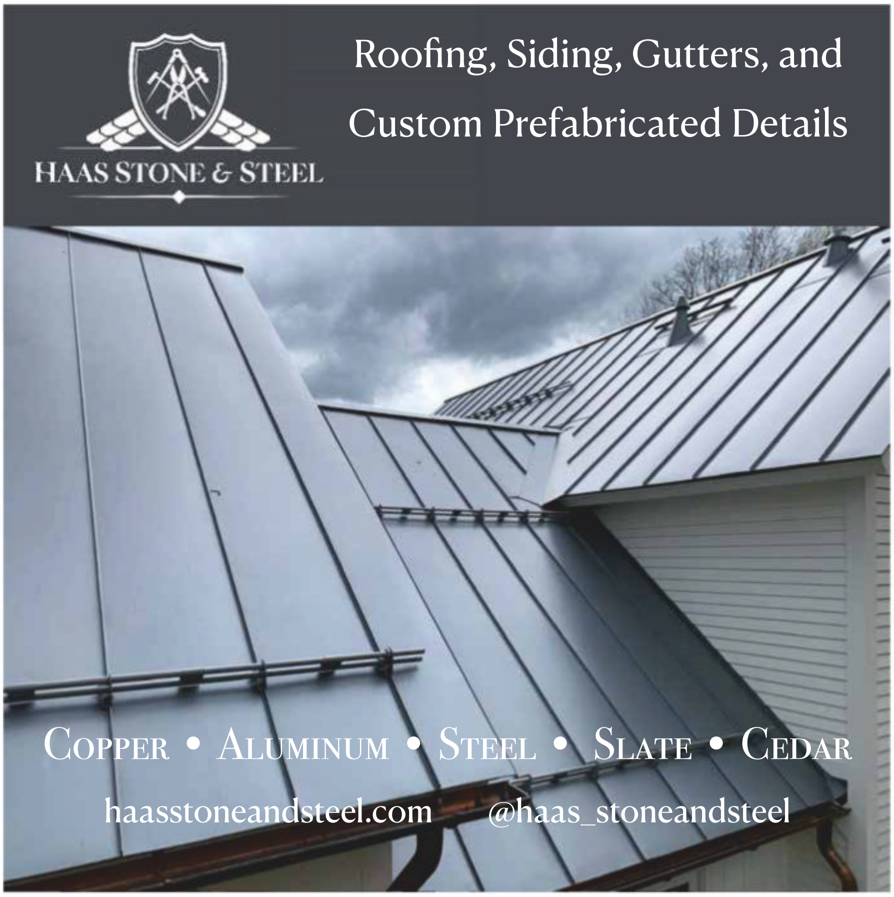
He stipulated that the confession be revealed only after his death, which came on the scheduled date in Malone's jail yard and was described by an unnamed reporter. "The sheriff directed his arms to be tied, the cap drawn over his face, and the rope adjusted, which being done, the cord was severed and James M. Bickford was launched into eternity. His struggles were unusually protracted from the fact that the spinal column or neck was not broken."

Cook was granted clemency by the governor. Instead of climbing the gallows, he was consigned to Clinton Prison in Dannemora and remained there for just over 12 years, receiving a pardon in November 1866.

The circumstances of his eventual demise are not entirely clear, except that he was dead within a decade of being released. Cook had reportedly moved to Pennsylvania, where both he and his wife died when a "torpedo" exploded beneath their bed. Torpedoes of the day were powerful explosive devices lowered into oil wells and detonated, fracturing the strata and dramatically increasing a well's output. After dominating the industry, that type of fracking was eventually replaced with a different method widely familiar today—hydraulic fracking.

It was never determined whether Cook's death was murder, suicide or accidental.

Lawrence Gooley is author of *Escape from Dannemora* as well as many other books related to North Country history and true crime. He founded Bloated Toe Publishing with his wife, Jill Jones, in 2004.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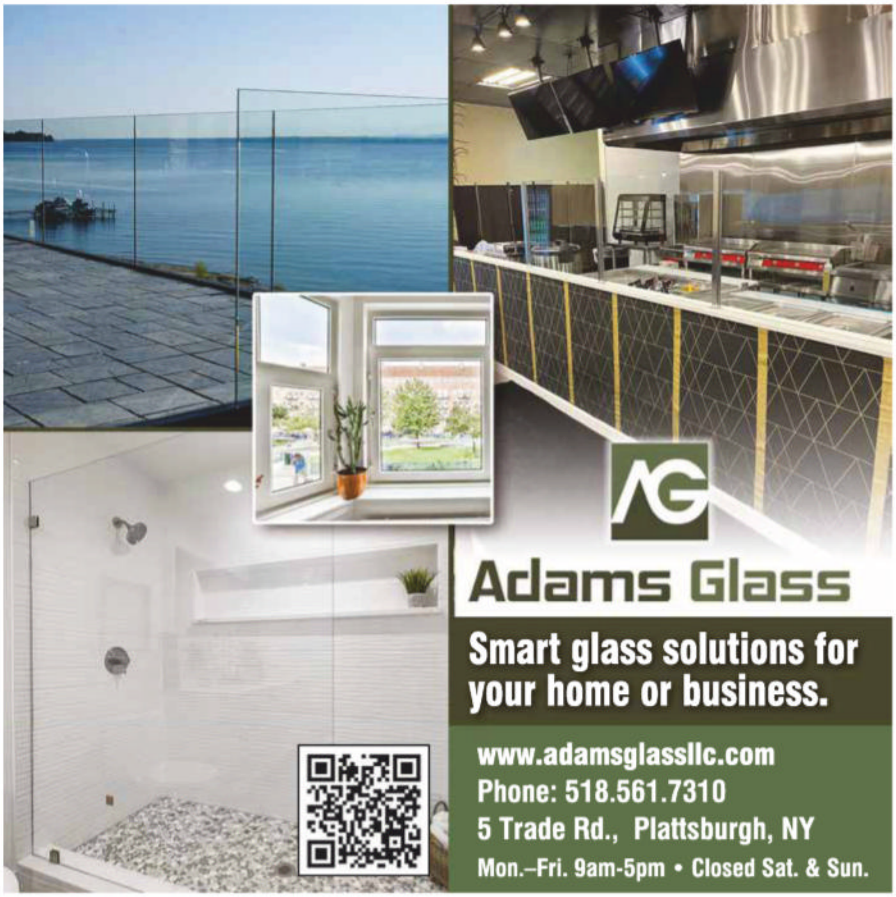
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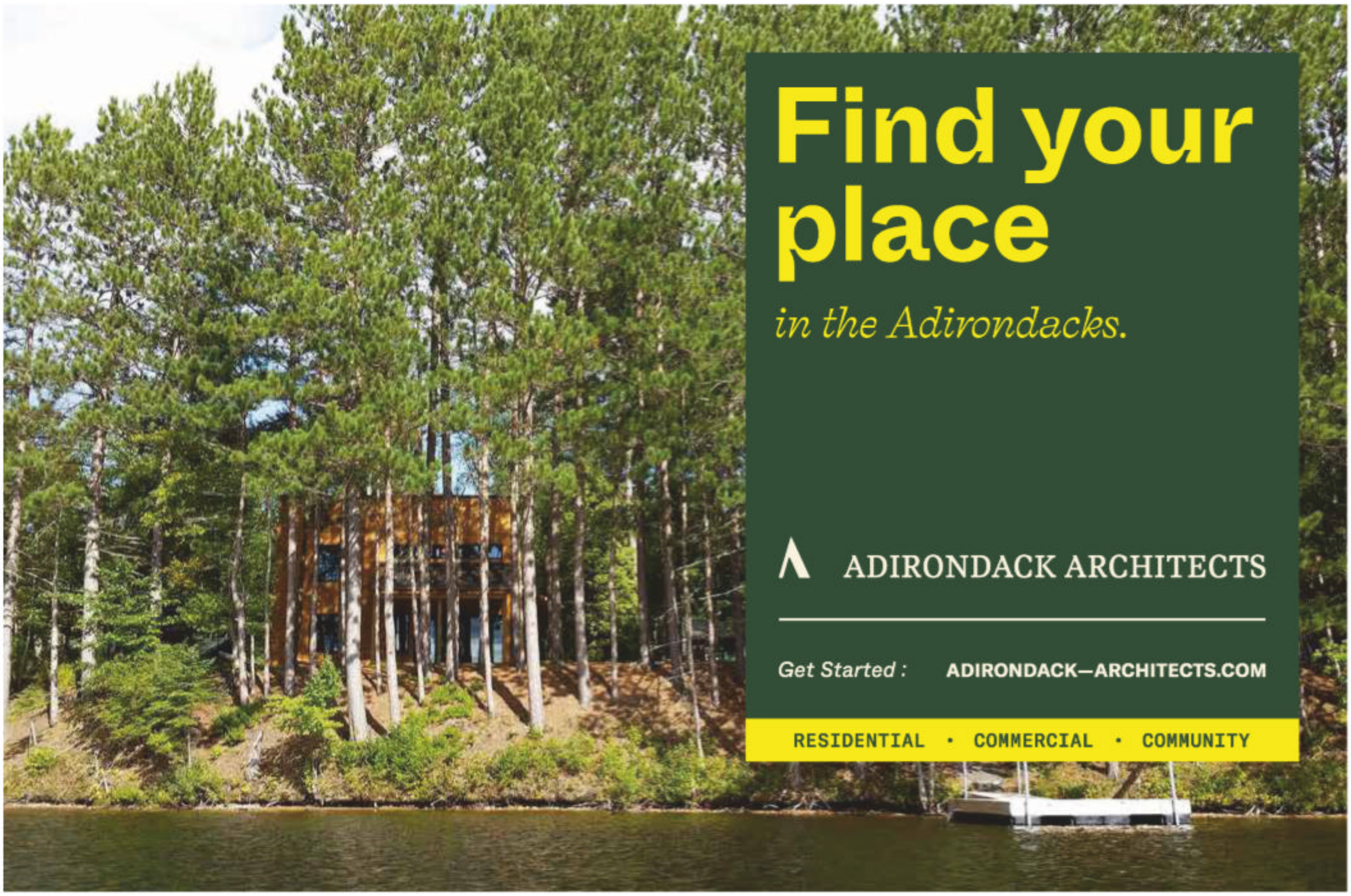

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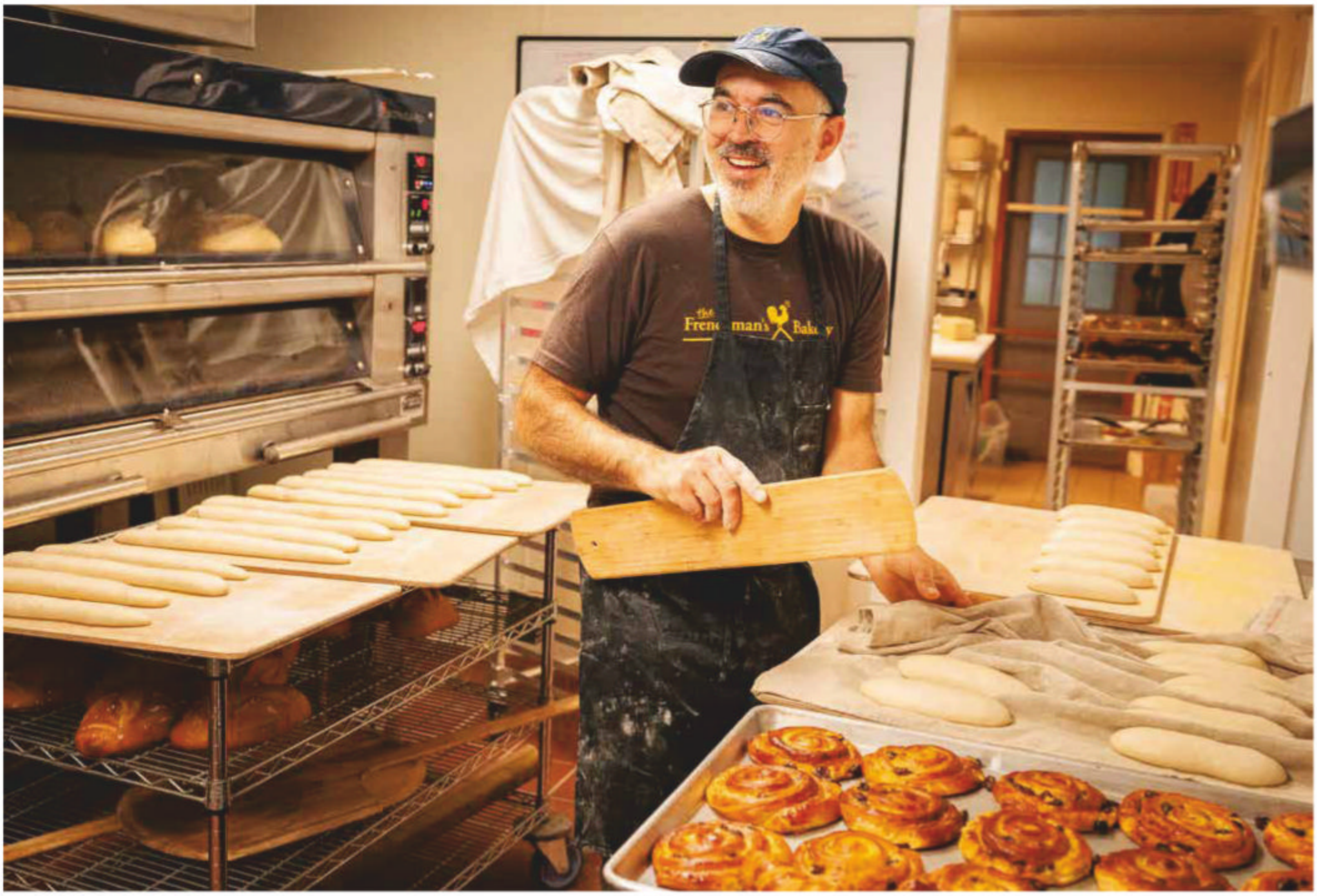

The Frenchman's Bakery

Bringing France's flaky pleasures to Keene Valley

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN STECHSCHULTE

Mathieu Fialon in his kitchen, where he bakes baguettes, croissants, canelés, pain aux raisins and other golden pastries.

Inside the Frenchman's Bakery, in Keene Valley, the air is warm and fragrant with baking bread. It's 5 a.m. and Mathieu Fialon, the eponymous Frenchman, is in the kitchen heaping flour into a stainless steel bowl on a digital scale. Filtered water is added next. "The slightest difference in proportions changes everything," he says, holding up his fingers to show a shape the size of a sugar cube. Baking is precise, but recipes almost don't matter. It's about juggling proportions and adapting to environmental conditions—temperature, humidity and feel.

Mathieu grew up in Bordeaux, France, a city often described as a "little Paris"—elegant and old-fashioned and, in his words, a bit stuck-up. "It has this aristocracy of wine," he says. "And my parents were not part of that culture."

Childhood weekends were spent at a small house in the woods next to a lake. Mathieu and his three siblings were free to roam, often searching for mushrooms. Family meals were rich with culinary tradition. Christmas at his grandparents' meant oysters, foie gras and wild mushroom sauces, always with crusty bread. "I grew up surrounded by people who respected food deeply," he says.

After high school, Mathieu enrolled in business school in Paris, but after two weeks he knew it wasn't for him. "I didn't belong," he says. He finished the program, though it left him unfulfilled.

He got a job in sales for a software company in Paris. A chance meeting in an airport led him to Judith, who became his wife. They eventually settled in Jersey City with their three children.

Corporate life wasn't enough. "Everybody in a corporate job has a fantasy," Mathieu says. His was cooking. Back in college he'd spent three days in a professional kitchen for a cooking competition and fell in love. "That experience stayed with me," he says. "From then on, I was always the guy cooking."

While working his day job, Mathieu studied for a chef's exam via an online program, guided by a French chef. He began looking for a space in Jersey City to open a small restaurant where he'd serve simple French meals to go. Then the pandemic hit. The final exam was canceled, and his dreams were dashed.

During the COVID lockdown, Mathieu was invited to cook at the Baxter Mountain Tavern, in Keene, at that time owned by a friend from Jersey City. The job brought him and his family to the Adirondacks for the summer. While there, he came across a building for sale on Route 73 in Keene Valley—a former diner and gun shop with many past lives. The retail space wasn't the best fit for a second home, but it was ideal for a bakery. Finding it "was pure serendipity," says Mathieu. "It just felt right. It was affordable, beautiful and we already had friends here. Every time we left, it hurt a little. I started to picture myself growing old here. There's something about the preserved, untouched nature of this place. Nothing is ugly. That matters to me."

Back in Jersey City, Mathieu apprenticed at a French bakery and began planning to open his own place in the Adirondacks.

Last summer, after three years of renovations and support from family, friends

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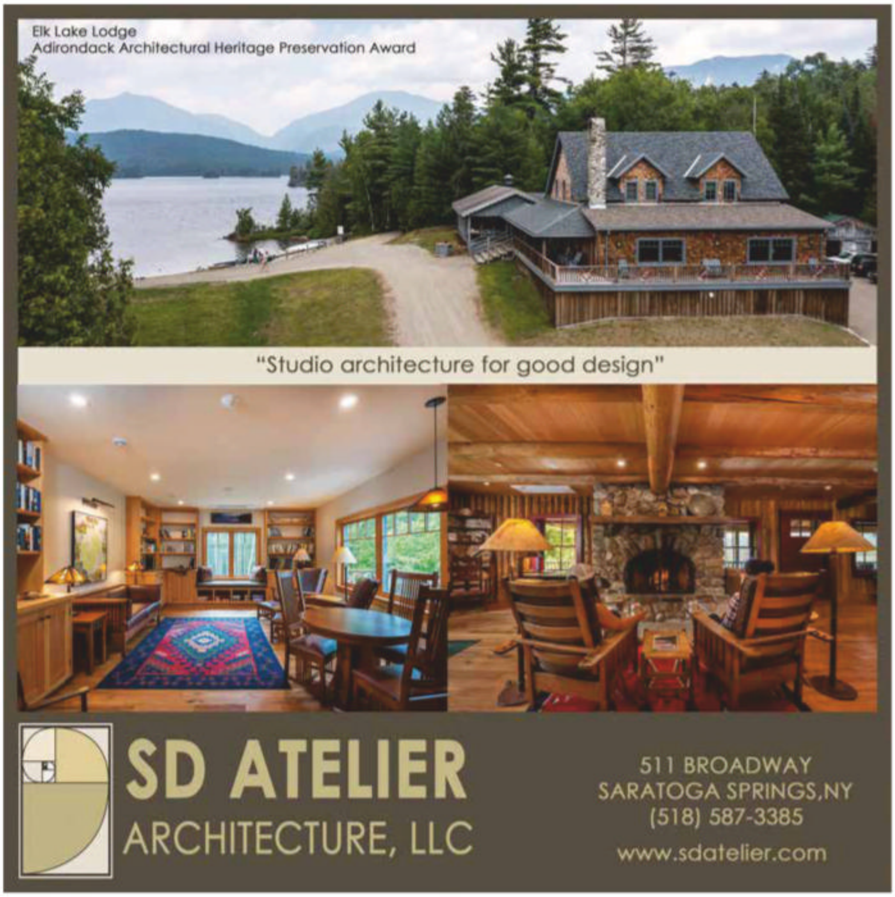
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and neighbors, the Frenchman's Bakery opened.

In the kitchen before the sun rises, croissants, canelés, pain aux raisins, ham-and-cheese sandwiches and other golden French pastries are stacked neatly behind glass counters. Cars twist into the few parking spaces out front. Customers are already two rows deep at the counter before the "Open" flag is hung outside. Edith Piaf sings from a small speaker. The door barely closes before it's opened again and another expectant face appears. Dogs on leashes and baby carriages get tangled on the porch. By 10:30 a.m., the bakery has sold out of everything.

In his "lab," as he calls it, Mathieu makes croissants by folding together alternating layers of flour and low-moisture French butter, then rolling the slab flat until it forms a dense sheet about 45 millimeters thick and 12 inches long. He sends the dough through a laminator, where a conveyor belt moves it back and forth between rollers. The rollers are adjusted in millimeter increments—thinner and thinner—pressing the butter and flour into increasingly fine layers. With each pass, the dough is folded over itself and rolled again until the layers are thinner than paper, creating the delicate lamination that gives a croissant its signature flakiness.

As the sheet of dough exits the laminator and lands on a stainless steel table, it's cut into long triangles and rolled by hand into tight croissant shapes. They're placed in a proofer—a machine that looks like a refrigerator—where, overnight, the dough swells. Gluten fibers stretch and trap gas, and the dough triples in size. Finally, the croissants are baked into something almost magical—bigger and more complex than the sum of their four ingredients.

"This is what I imagine lying in bed at night," says Mathieu. "I've been thinking about this for years." ▲

The Frenchman's Bakery (1888 Route 73, Keene Valley) is open May through October. Visit frenchmansbakery.com or call (518) 412-2132 for a menu and hours.

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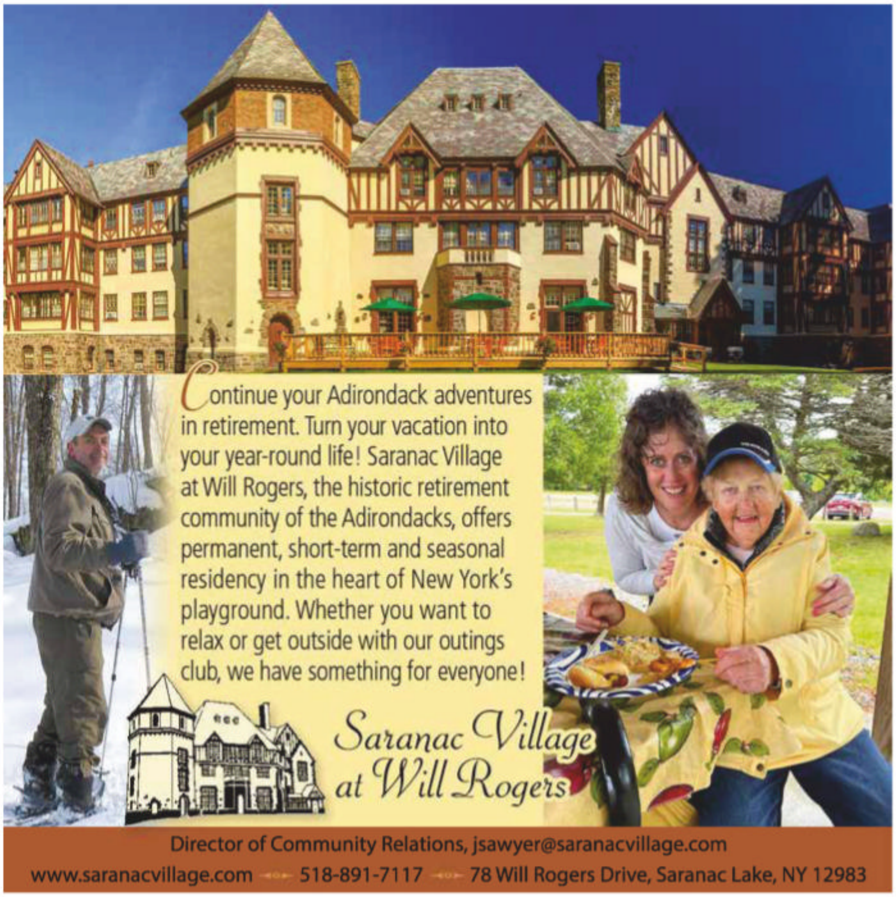
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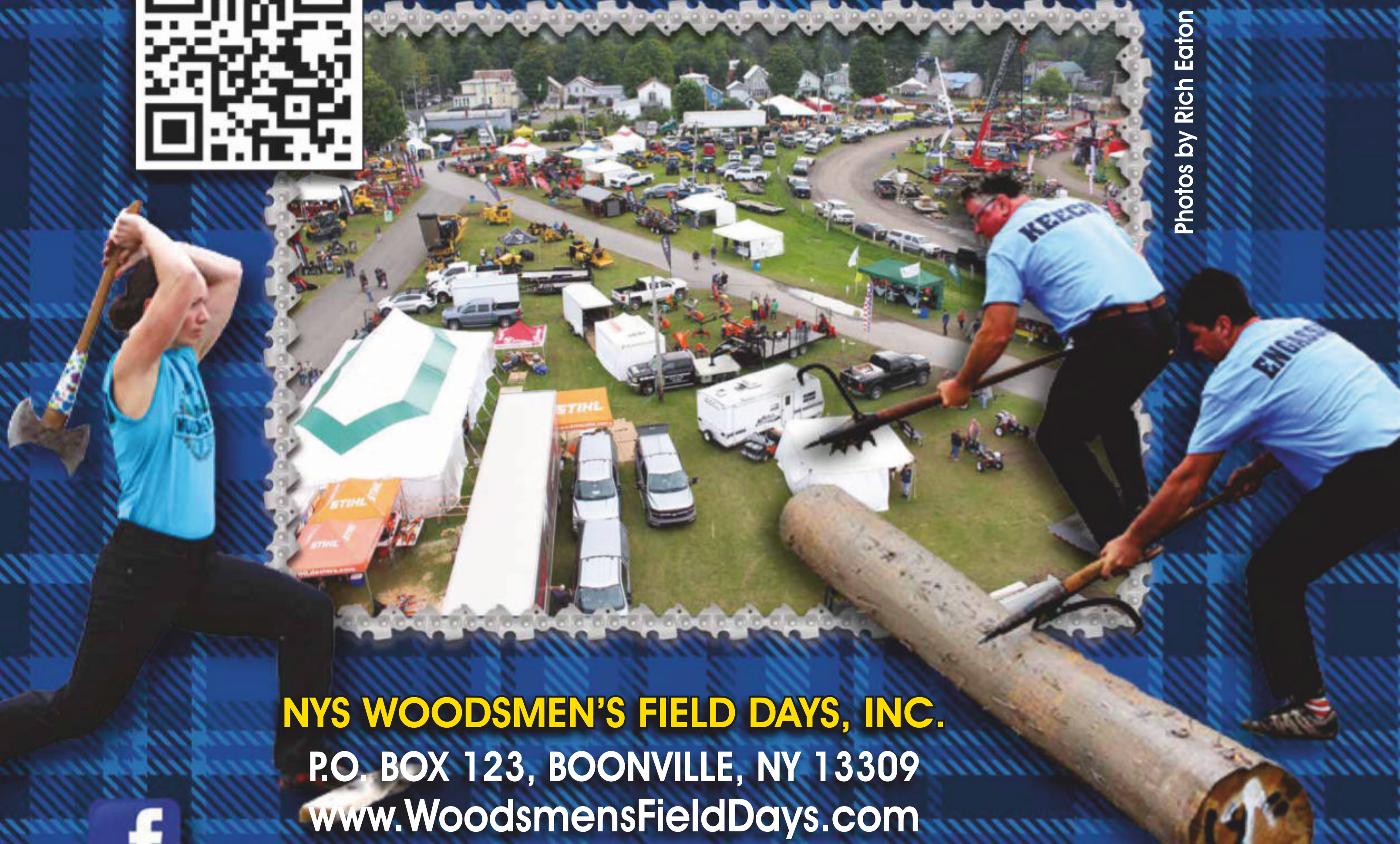

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Ride, Poodles, Ride

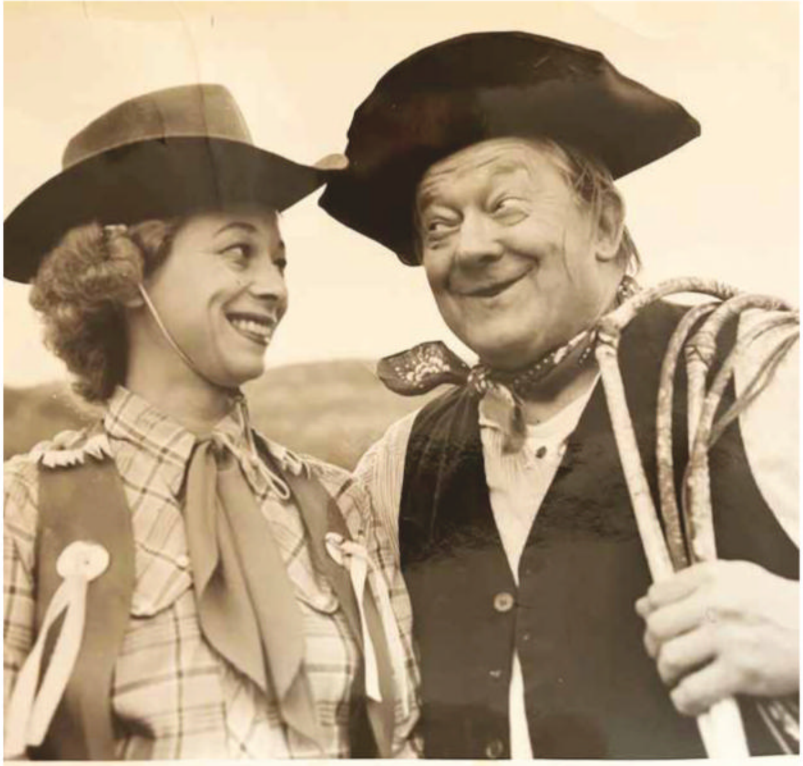
Lake George's superstar circus performer

BY SALLY SVENSON

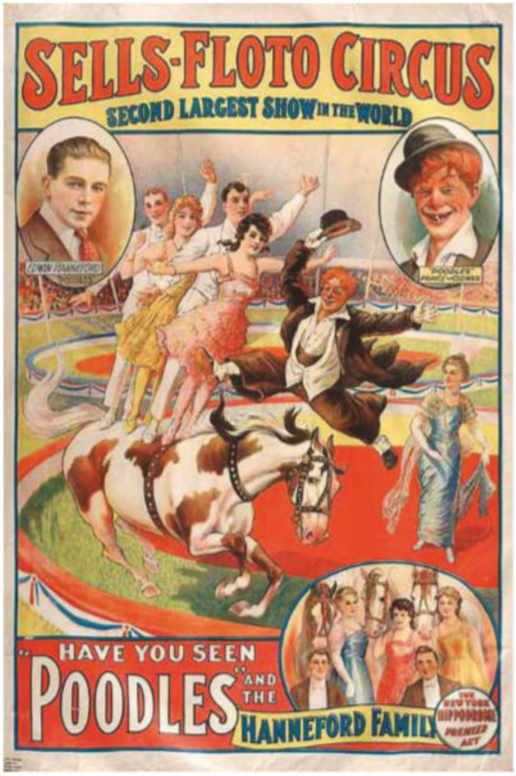
Edwin "Poodles" Hanneford has been called the greatest trick horseback rider of the 20th century—and possibly of all time. Born into a multigenerational English circus family and a performer from the age of five, he spoofed his superb equestrian ability by becoming a riding clown. In a red wig, clown makeup and a baggy suit, Hanneford was the first person to master a back somersault from one running horse to another following behind, and became a Guinness World Record–holder with his 26 consecutive jumps on and off a fast-moving horse. He was also, for some 37 years, a resident of Kattskill Bay, on the eastern shore of Lake George.

Poodles and his bareback-riding siblings, Elizabeth "Lizzie" and George—born in 1891, 1893 and 1895—along with their widowed mother, the ringmaster for the family act, arrived in the U.S. with their horses in 1915. They did so at the invitation of American entrepreneur John Ringling, who had seen them perform in London and invited them to work with the Ringling-owned Barnum & Bailey Circus. The Hannefords were received with such enthusiasm that they stayed on, with *Variety* magazine reporting of a 1917 appearance that "the Hanneford act is so far and away the star turn of the big show this season nothing else in it compares." Poodles, whose nickname derived from a comment by an aunt that he looked like a poodle as an infant, was the act's undisputed star.

The Hanneford siblings performed together for the first several years of their American residence before going their separate professional ways. They became citizens, married others in the circus world, and started households of their own, but maintained family ties by building homes on adjacent lots in Kattskill Bay for use in the slack late-fall/winter touring season. George, who discovered the region when playing Glens Falls with the Sells-Floto Circus in July 1927, committed to buying a property that year. His siblings became Kattskill Bay land owners in 1930. The *Glens Falls Times* reported in May that more than 200 invited visitors and



"Poodles" Hanneford wowed audiences around the country with his trick riding, and later entertained crowds at North Hudson's Frontier Town with his daughter, Gracie.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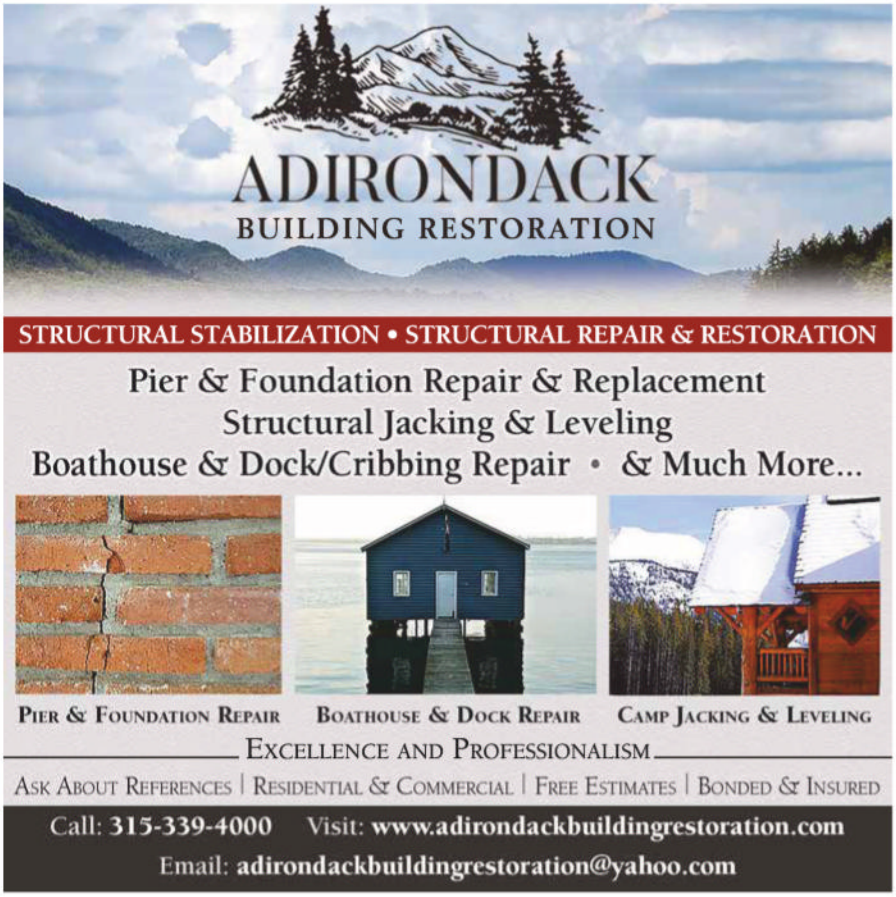

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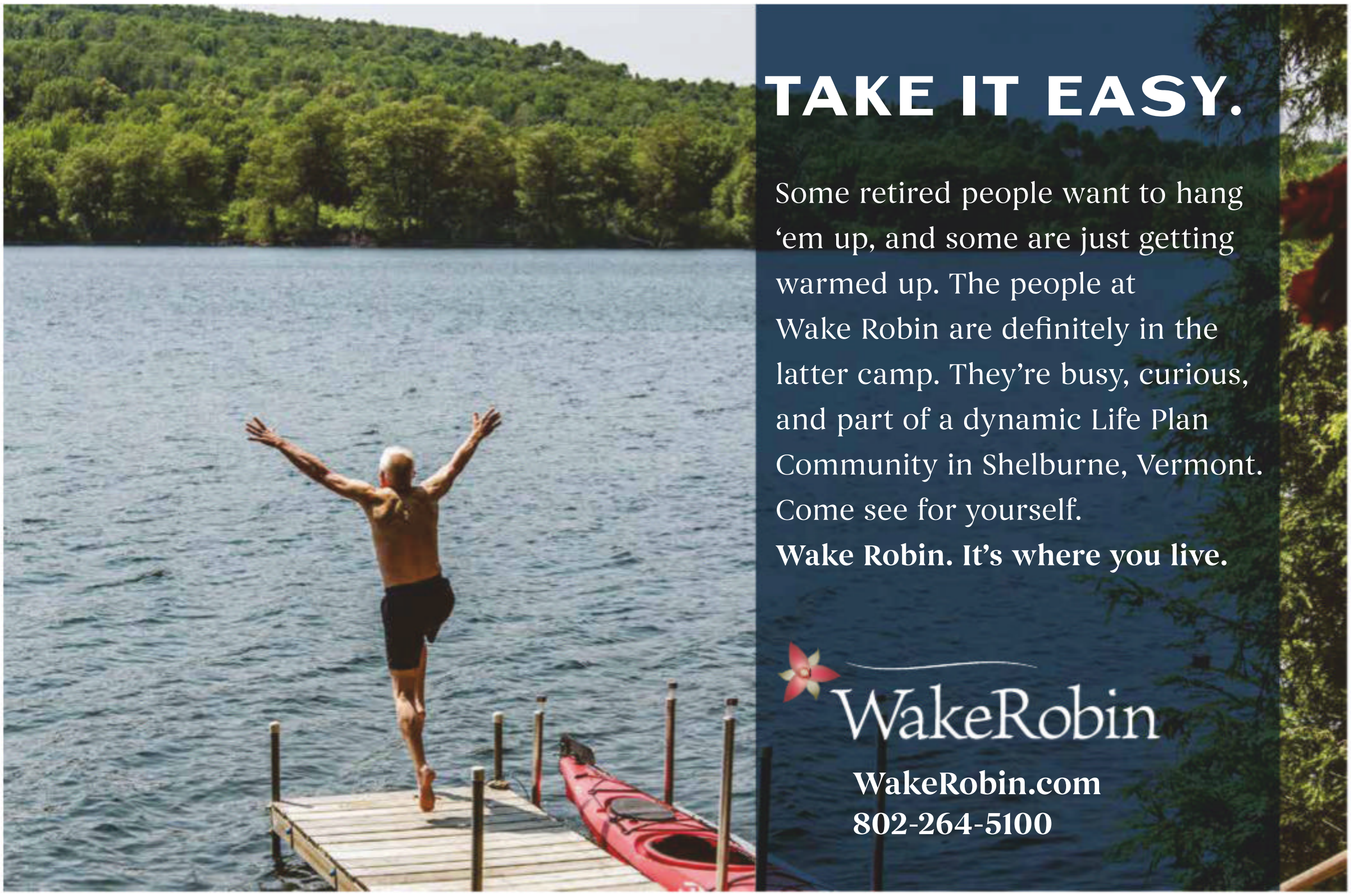
acquaintances had recently attended an "informal circus" staged by the siblings and Lizzie's well-known trapeze-artist husband, Ernest Clarke, in the Hanneford training barn's full-size circus ring.

The George Hannefords, who developed their own riding act, were the most frequent users of their Adirondack property as a winter base through 1942, and George's three children—George Jr., Thomas and Kay Francis—attended Kattskill Bay's one-room schoolhouse when in residence.

Lizzie Hanneford Clarke's family soon transferred its residential allegiance to the Pacific Coast. But Poodles, whose professional career developed to include vaudeville, Broadway musicals and more than 40 films in which he played small parts or showed off his comic equestrian skills, spent Christmases at Kattskill Bay when he could. His busy schedule, however, meant that he, his wife, Grace (an equestrienne), and daughter, Gracie—a frequent performer as a bareback rider in her father's act—spent much of their time on the road. In February 1942, it was reported that Poodles and "his troupe," along with two horse vans, a baggage van, personal car, and trailer to house personnel, were leaving Kattskill Bay on a six-month tour, "mostly in the Middle West."

But it was not until 1949 that Poodles and his family returned to Kattskill Bay. They passed much of the 1940s in California, where Poodles bought a North Hollywood ranch due to his movie commitments. Gracie, too, became involved in the film industry, appearing in 1946 as a bareback-riding double for Judy Garland in the movie *Till the Clouds Roll By*. But it was good, as Poodles phrased it to the *Glens Falls Times* in December 1949, to finally spend "Christmas at home" in Kattskill Bay following their long absence. After another two years in California, some of which Poodles spent working on *Springfield Rifle*, a 1952 film starring Gary Cooper, his family made Kattskill Bay its full-time home.

Poodles's brother, George, on the other hand, rarely returned to the one-time family compound after the early 1940s. Deciding that he had had enough



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of cold weather, he purchased property in Florida. Today several of his descendants are active in the circus world.

In late 1954 Poodles and Gracie discontinued their riding act in deference to Poodles's advancing age. But they continued to appear in circuses, with Poodles doing some clowning and Gracie assisting Poodles in his second circus specialty: an Australian whip act. This routine, similar to a bullwhip performance, entailed precise whip manipulating, whip cracking and acrobatics.

The circus in which the Hannefords were performing in early 1956 unexpectedly closed in May, so the Hannefords sought employment at Frontier Town, the theme park in North Hudson that had opened four years earlier. "When they hired us," Gracie later explained, "they didn't know a thing about us or our history. They just liked what they saw." Frontier Town, she added, "became our summertime home." Poodles developed a comic persona as "Panhandle Pete, the Old Prospector," and staged his whip act in the rodeo ring. Gracie performed as an equestrienne and assisted her father with his whip act before creating her own dog act. Grace worked in the weaving shop. After Poodles's death, in 1967, both women stayed on. Poodles's circus fame remained unabated: he was inducted into the International Circus Hall of Fame in 1968 and in 1995 became the first comedic rider inducted into the Clown Hall of Fame.

Gracie and her mother remained for the rest of their lives in Kattskill Bay. Regretting the limited education she'd received as a traveling performer, Gracie remedied the deficit, and in 1977 passed her New York State Regents Exams. When she died, in 2006, she left the bulk of her estate, some $900,000, to the Lake George Scholarship Association for a scholarship in her father's name to support students pursuing degrees in the performing and written arts.

She, as well as her parents, are buried in Pine View Cemetery in Glens Falls. The headstone above the family gravestone features an image of Poodles doing his famous step-off from the back of a horse. ▲

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Birders of a Feather

A rare sighting draws the devoted

BY MARK WILSON

Monday, March 24th, I set out on foot to the post office. My route leads past the entrance to Saranac Lake High School, on Olive Street near the traffic light at Lapan Highway. As I approached the intersection, a large blunt object hurtled noiselessly through the trees beyond, pursued by about a dozen crows in full alarm. *You don't see that every day*, I noted to myself as I turned the corner and headed downtown.

I am a bird watcher by marriage; Mary, my wife, comes from a murder of birders, a family that will drop everything to chase practically anything on the wing. I recognize owls generally by profile and even a couple by name—Woodsy comes to mind. Their skill maneuvering at high speeds through tightly-woven woods has always impressed me. But I'm not great on things like habitat and range, so I failed to grasp that I had just seen a rare visitor: *Strix Nebulosa*, the great gray owl. The range of this nonmigratory species covers most of northern Eurasia from Finland eastward to Russia's Chukchi Peninsula, over the Bering Strait to Alaska and across our continent to the northern shore of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron. On the eastern end of its range, the great gray seldom ventures south of the Canadian border.

A quarter mile after my unwitting brush with international celebrity, I came upon a cell phone on the sidewalk. Figuring it had been dropped by a careless student on their way to class, I picked it up, hesitated, turned around and started back toward the school; someone was probably panicking.

The phone pinged, announcing a message from Derek Rogers. How coincidental, I thought, that Mary works with someone named Derek Rogers, from Willsboro and a rare visitor to these parts. While contemplating the odds of there being two Derek Rogers so close by in the northern Adirondacks, I approached the school. Another ping

Great gray owls seldom venture south of the Canadian border. This one spent an afternoon perched in a hemlock tree in Saranac Lake.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEREK ROGERS

on the phone alerted me to a text from somebody with the same surname as another of Mary's coworkers.

Something was up. I called Mary on my phone to report the found device and that Derek was texting it.

Mary told me that she was standing next to Derek in the office. He was frantically trying to reach Becca Halter in Saranac Lake. A short while earlier, Becca had returned home from walking her dog and discovered a great gray owl perched on the limb of a tree across the street from her house. She immediately called Derek—Adirondack Land Trust's resident bird expert and world-class photographer—to report her sighting. Derek, who is ordinarily as unexcitable as a bittern in an August marsh, ordered Becca not to let the bird out of her sight. But the crows had also discovered the owl, which took flight down French Hill while they formed a squadron. Becca—first in car, then on foot—tailed the crows. She dropped the phone before the trail went cold.

Mary relayed as much of this as she could. I told her to tell Derek I knew where that bird went. But Derek had already taken off with his camera, driving from Keene to Saranac Lake. I returned to Lapan Highway, having heard the crows, who cannot penetrate thick conifer growth, fly up and over a dense six acres of taiga across that road from the high school. Following the sound of the crows as they continued to complain about the winged intruder from their perch in the canopy above, I climbed over a dirty snowbank and across a half-frozen ditch to a deer path leading into the trees. As I neared the spot where the chorus of crows was loudest, I glanced up. Twenty feet ahead, the bulky great gray was perched on a thin branch of a hemlock about 10 feet from the ground. I backed off to a respectful distance.

Derek continued pinging Becca's phone. It occurred to me at this point, even though I could not unlock Becca's phone nor call her to get the access code, I could ask her phone to call Derek. He answered immediately. I let him know that the owl and I were just hanging out

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in the middle of the woods together. He needed to know exactly where I was (in the middle of the woods).

Just then Becca called my phone, wondering if I had her phone and where I was (again: in the woods with the owl). As the land trust's mapping expert, Becca is sharper than I am. So I asked her, over my phone, to give Derek, on her phone, and me a quick tutorial on dropping a pin so we might send our coordinates to each other. The owl watched me with concern.

Somehow it all worked out. From my position I could see enough of a nearby access road to spot Derek, still with me on Becca's phone, driving past.

Moments later, I heard his distinctive voice calling from scrubland on the other side of a nearby garden center. I managed to talk him in, circuitously so as not to disturb the feathered dignitary. (Derek is exceedingly courteous to birds of all stripes.) Becca joined us a short while later. By this time Mary had called her brother, a history teacher at the high school, to apprise him. It was lunchtime, so he didn't need to run out on a classroom full of students.

Other calls followed. Within minutes a half-dozen birders joined us—they have precise and mysterious locating instincts. The owl was fortunate to find itself among such well-mannered admirers. Under its wary gaze, in hushed tones, conversation turned to other rare bird sightings, peppered with complaints at how disruptive some birders can be. I left them to go change my shoes.

Mary returned home at dusk. We wandered to the woods. The owl had been very accommodating for much of the afternoon, but eventually grew tired of the attention. Besides, it hadn't had a thing to eat since breakfast. The crows had long since scattered. Exit owl.

Two birders lingered at the tree line. One was a guy who detoured on his way north from Chatham to Massena, where another great gray had been sighted.

The other was Brian, an ornithologist friend we haven't seen in years. But it is always a surprise and delight when we happen to catch a glimpse of him. ▲

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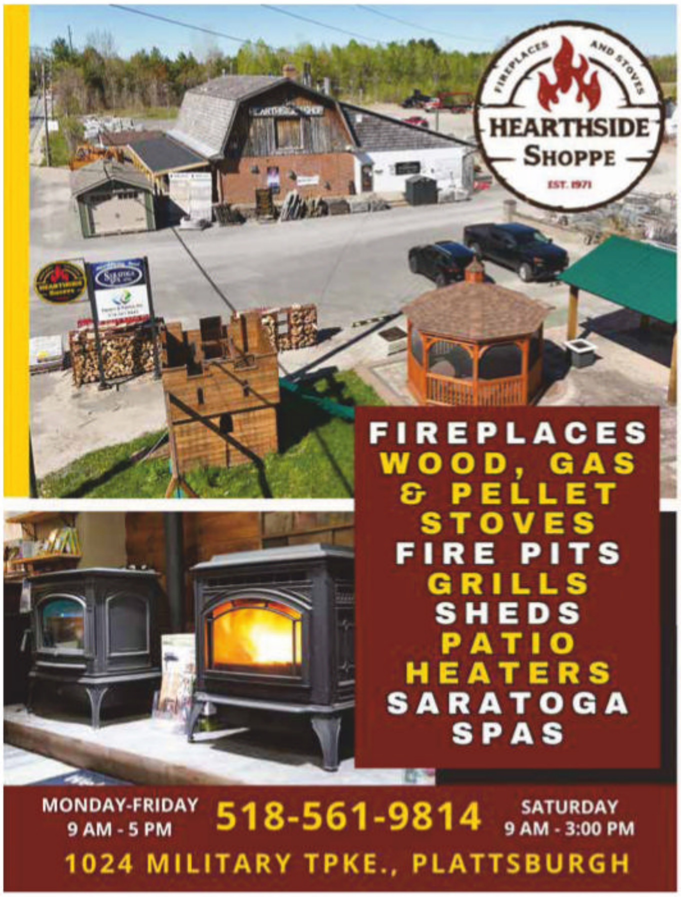

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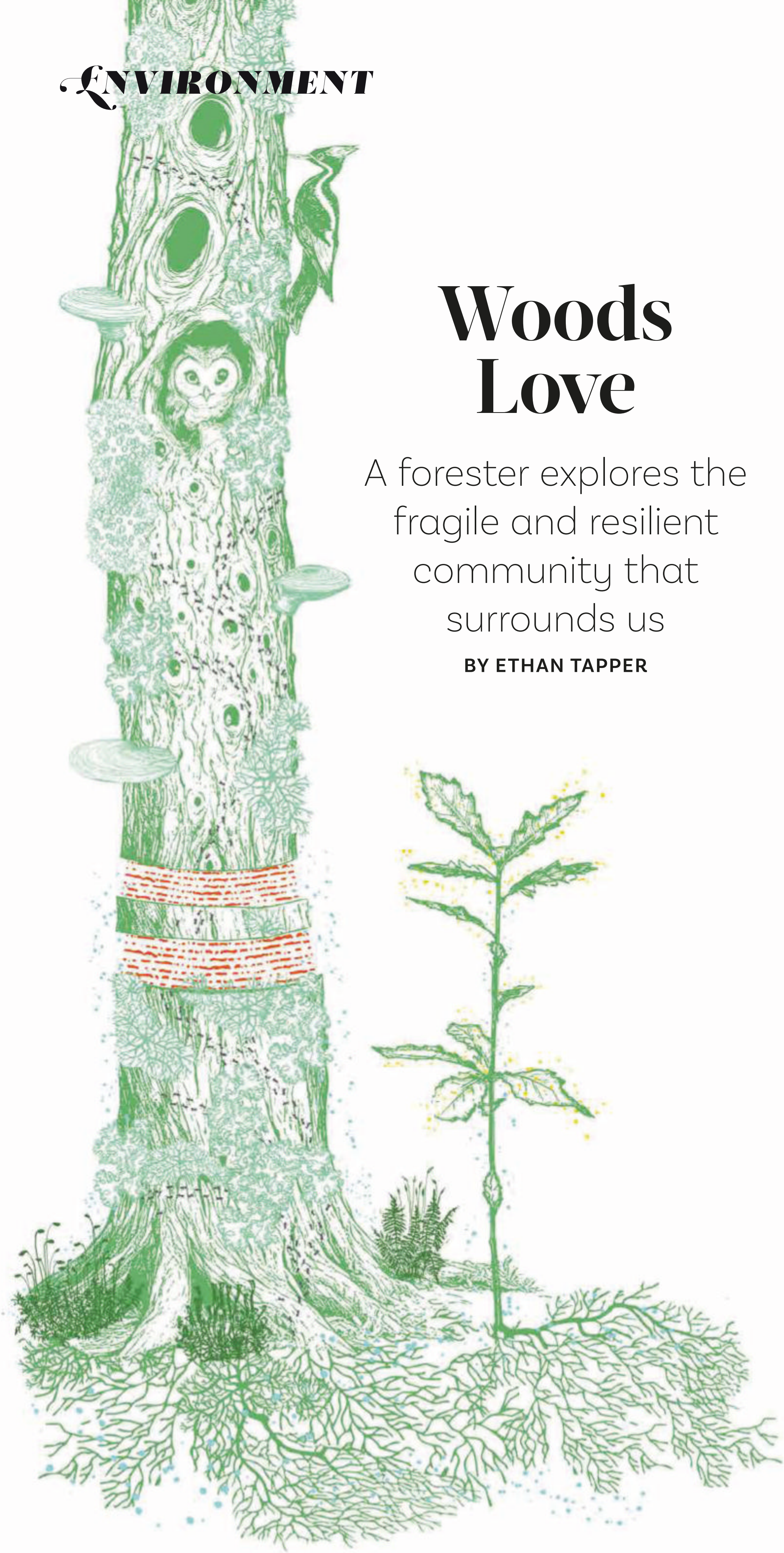

Woods Love

A forester explores the fragile and resilient community that surrounds us

BY ETHAN TAPPER

The sun leans toward the Adirondacks, the light slicing across the mountain from west to east. I wade through a sea of felled trees, their branches arching, the saw rumbling in my hands. Down in the valley, people are drinking cold cans of beer, floating down the slow riffles of the big river. As sweat rolls down my back, a part of me wants to put down my saw and float among them. A piece of me wants to give up this struggle, to seek a life of ease and comfort, but I will not—responsibility carries me forward.

I approach a bigtooth aspen, its leaves shimmering over a gaggle of oak saplings. Aspen will always make me think of ice cream: its creamy, smooth bark, the ease with which the saw slides through its soft, white, pulpy wood. Aspen is a sugar rush, fast-growing and short-lived, as ephemeral as ice cream on a summer day.

Instead of felling the aspen I girdle it, cutting a shallow groove that just touches its bright wood. As I encircle the aspen, I sever its cambium, the conduit that passes the riches of its leaves down to its sinking roots. Over the next few years, the aspen will suffocate, becoming a snag—a dead-standing tree. Slowly, it will become a habitat for another keystone species: the pileated woodpecker, flying through the forest in its red cap, its wingbeats like shuddering gasps. In ten years, the aspen will be a city of ants, wood-boring beetles, and tunneling insect larvae. Pileated woodpeckers will visit the aspen tree often. With its powerful beak pecking as fast as seventeen times per second, the pileated woodpeckers will mine and probe, foraging for wriggling grubs hidden in the aspen's softening flesh, following veins of richness into the heart of the tree.

As it forages, the pileated woodpecker will excavate long, oval cavities in the aspen's trunk, empty spaces that—like the patch cuts, like beaver ponds in the valley—are fated to manifest life. Tree cavities provide nesting, denning, and foraging sites for more than fifty species of birds and mammals in this forest—from barred owls and bats to wood

ILLUSTRATION BY GWEN JAMISON VOGEL

ducks and chimney swifts, to fishers and flying squirrels and gray foxes. Like the beaver, like the passenger pigeon, the pileated woodpecker will take something entire and intact and fill it with holes. Like beaver ponds, like the aftermath of a passenger pigeon flock, like the patch cuts, these holes will prove to be generative, filling with many precious things.

As pileated woodpeckers forage, they do two seemingly contradictory things. They protect the other trees in the forest by regulating populations of pests, policing the delicate balance between trees and the insects that parasitize them. At the same time, the pileated woodpeckers are doulas of death: capitalizing on the weakness of stressed and damaged trees and ultimately facilitating their death and decline. Even as they kill trees, pileated woodpeckers provide a crucial benefit to the forest: igniting the critical process of nutrient cycling, the long road that turns wood into soil, that returns trees to the earth so that the forest of the future may live.

In the coming years, shards of pulpy wood will gather in piles at the aspen's feet. The aspen will drop its fine branches and then its larger branches, becoming a naked, limbless tower. The creatures of the necrosphere will spread through the aspen's shrinking body and it will be decentralized, becoming a bustling world of tiny things. In a world in which a dead tree may contain four times the biomass that it held in life, I will watch the aspen's humming cavities, wondering what it means for a tree to be alive.

Eventually, the aspen will fall. As it sinks into the earth, it will become a nurse log—a rich, moist seedbed for young trees and plants—and hemlock and yellow birch seedlings will sink their roots into its fertile flesh. Over the following decades, the aspen will be disassembled, its substance carried away by countless flying and crawling and growing things. Slowly, its essence will be dissolved into the soil, where it will feed trees, plants, and fungi, help the forest's soil slow, disperse, and retain water, and add to the forest's car-

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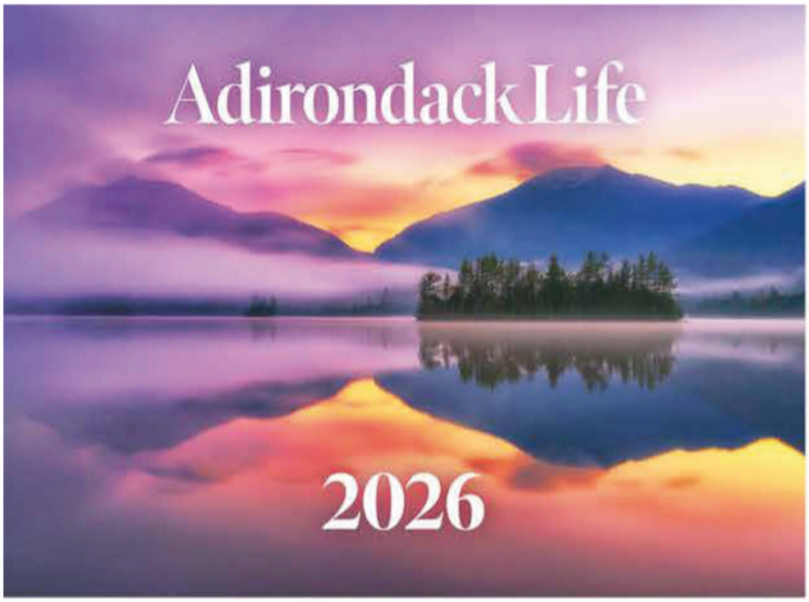
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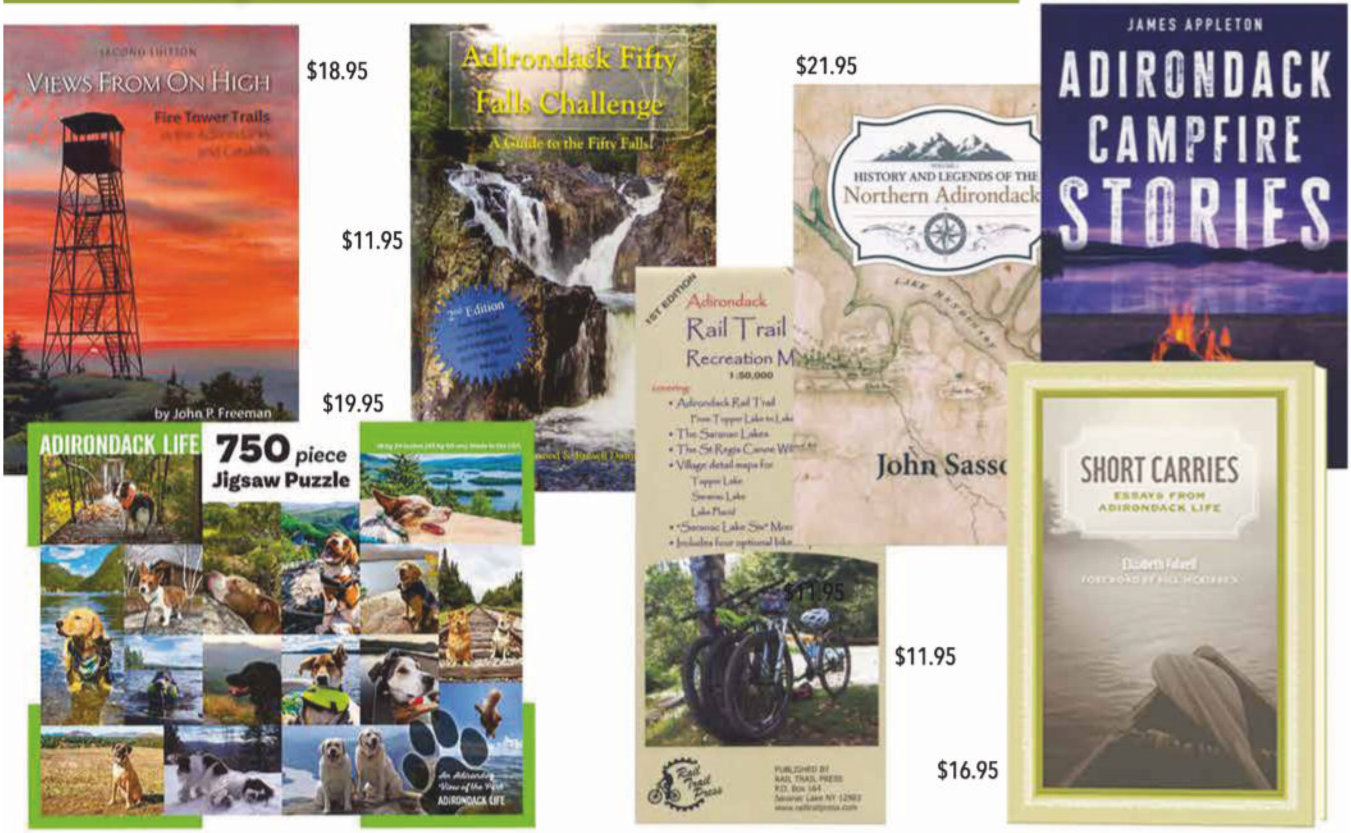
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bon pool, 60 percent of which is stored beneath my feet.

Over the coming years, the aspen will be a forest in microcosm: tracing a path from young to old to young again, a sinuous journey with no endpoint, no climax, no final destination to reach, no single purpose to embody. As it dies, the aspen will be like a beaver pond, turning from open water to meadow to shrubland to forest and back to water again, with many detours along the way. In each moment, the aspen will become something beautiful and precious and full of life—and then it will change again. I stand back and look at the aspen, its clear trunk now marred by two shallow, parallel cuts. I have sent this tree on a beautiful journey, a path it will walk as slowly and as certainly as the sun quests toward the western horizon. Beside it, the little oaks stand in its shade, waiting to be released. As the aspen decays, white threads of fungi will reach through it, passing its essence into the roots of the oaks. Decades from now, the aspen will be gone but its legacies will remain—hidden in the oaks' trunks and their branches, in their leaves and in their red wood, in the countless acorns that they cast over the earth.

Like myself, the pileated woodpecker creates habitat for some and destroys habitat for others, protects some trees from mortality, and guides others toward the end of their lives. Like the beavers and the passenger pigeons, the pileated woodpecker's gifts are cryptic and macabre, hidden behind the dark, heavy curtains of death. The pileated woodpecker is another organ in a forest community that celebrates both life and death, another piece of an ecosystem built on both persistence and capitulation, both resilience and change.

I turn off the saw. In the distance, a pileated woodpecker hammers through the white wood of an aspen, eating ice cream in the heat of this summer day.

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THE LEGACY OF FIRE

Continued from page 47

expanses of paper birch today you'll see the echoes of the fires a century ago. The beautiful fast-growing birches are short-lived, with a maximum lifespan of about 100 years. Today, they have mostly fallen, papery white skeletons on the forest floor beneath a maple canopy.

Whether forest recovery is led by paper birch or by quaking aspen and bigtooth aspen might depend in part on the season of the burn. Ignition is most common in early spring and in the fall, when the sun reaches the forest floor and dries it out. The great fire of 1903, which destroyed more than 400,000 acres, began in leaf litter dried by strong spring winds, while the 600,000-acre fire of 1908 began in the fall in slash piles that had dried all summer. Regardless of burn season, spring or fall, there are seeds of pioneer species ready to colonize the bare ground. Paper birch trees release their seeds in the late fall and winter when they skitter across the snow. The aspens don't produce seed until June; both species have adapted to the different fire seasons.

A host of other species flourish after a fire. Dead and dying trees draw large numbers of insects, which in turn support an increase in the woodpecker population. The grassy meadows that follow create a surge in habitat for small rodents and their hungry predators, like hawks, owls, foxes and coyotes.

Soon after a burn the ground may be covered by a carpet of mosses, such as the silvery Bryum or the haircap mosses that quickly stabilize the soil surface. There is even a moss called Funaria, which has fire-resistant spores that are stored in the soil, waiting for a fire to create the opportunity they need to grow. Their presence helps retain moisture and provides a seedbed for later plants to colonize. Among the most striking of the post-fire plants is the aptly named fireweed, with its gorgeous rose-colored blooms on stems that can be up to four feet tall.

FRUITS FOLLOW FIRE

Bracken fern, grasses and tangles of berry brambles welcome the burned-over ground. It is said that one of the original

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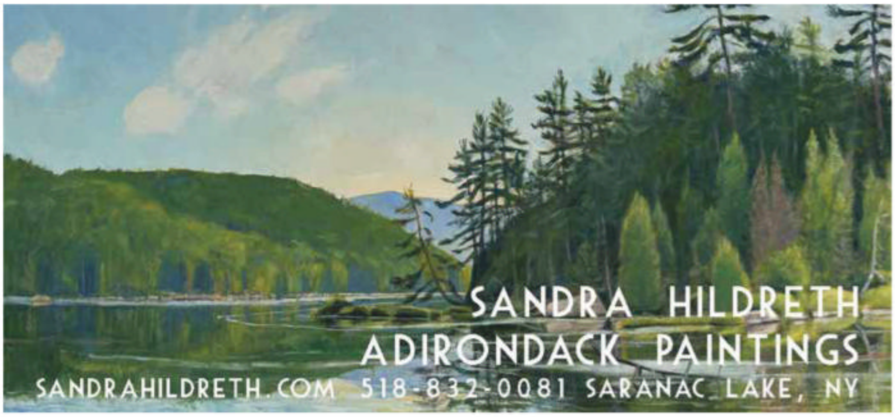
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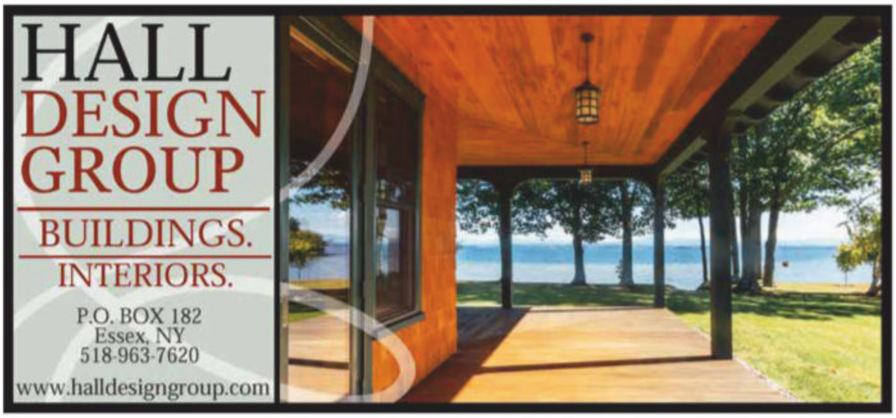
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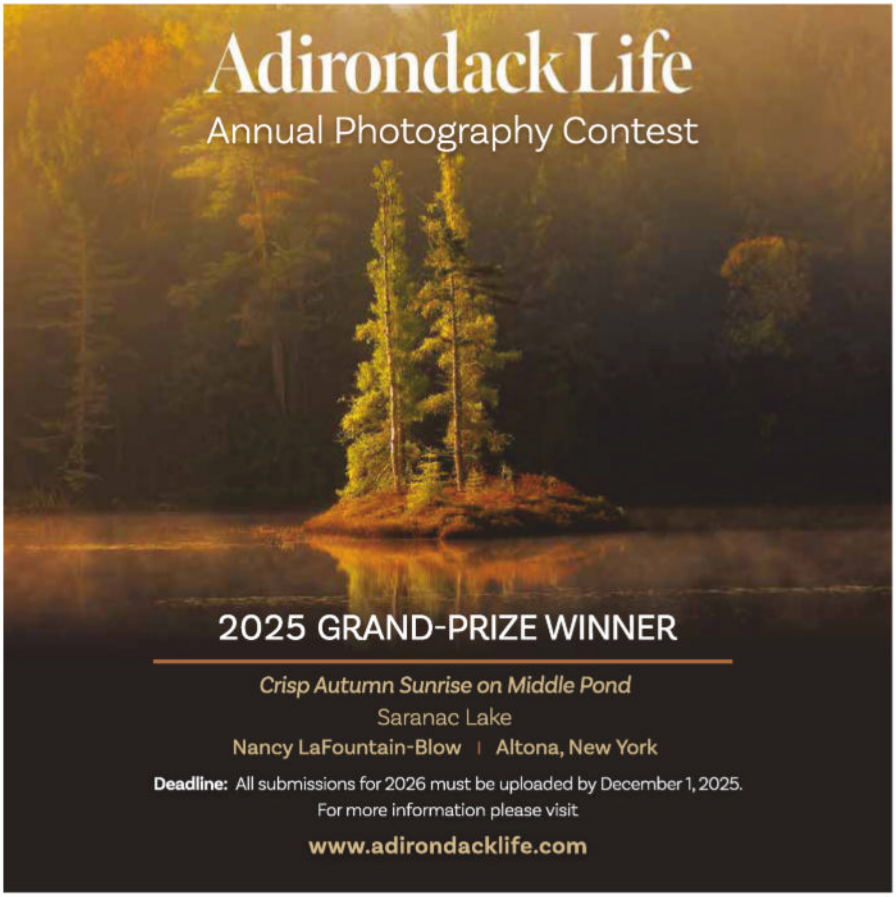
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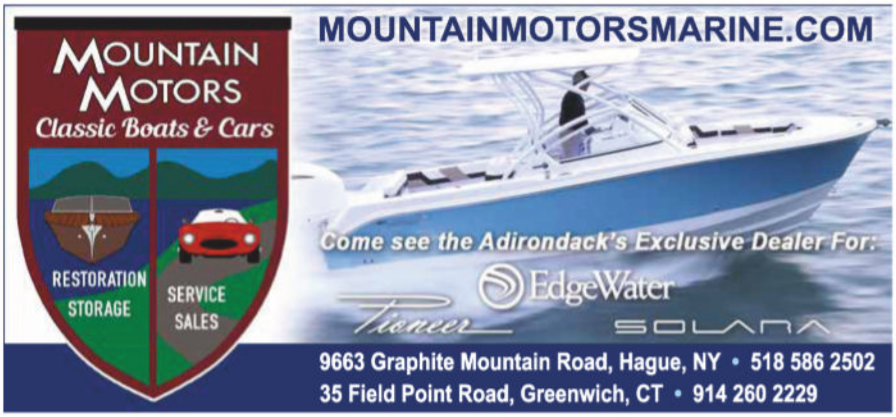
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twins created the delicious berries and his destructive twin added the thorns. And where there are berries there are bears to feast upon them. In the Adirondacks, fruits follow fire.

One of the favorites of bears and foxes and birds of every kind is the small tree known as fire cherry. With their beautiful striped red bark they are easily recognizable on burned ground and wherever disturbance has created sunny openings. They make buckets of gleaming sour red cherries, dangling on a long stem, that draw flocks of birds when they ripen.

Being a plant that needs fire to flourish creates a dilemma in a landscape like the Adirondacks, where fire is not very common. To colonize burned ground, the plants have to get their seeds to those relatively rare patches. Some plants find fire by sending their seeds out on aerial reconnaissance—like the fluffy catkins of aspens or the tiny brown paper kites of birches. To be successful they have to blanket the area with seeds and hope that a few land in the right place. Other plants don't take the risk of their seeds not finding fire: they simply sit and wait for a fire to come to them. That can be a long wait, so their seeds have great longevity and are stored in the soil as a reservoir of seeds that lie dormant until catastrophe strikes. Fire, or pin, cherries excel at this. The birds love their fruit and so disperse the seeds all through the forest, but especially beneath the original parent trees.

These fire-cherry seeds cannot germinate in shade or in deep leaf litter, but they don't die, they just wait. When eventually a fire or a windstorm comes along and clears away the canopy, the seeds are right there, ready to germinate and take advantage of all the sun and nutrients. It is a bit of a mystery, though, how the seeds know when it is safe to germinate. How could a buried seed know that the forest canopy has disappeared?

A little brown seed might not look like much, but it contains pretty sophisticated equipment: a chemical system that allows it to detect and measure the wavelengths of light that it is receiving.

The spectrum of wavelengths differs between the full sun and the light filtered by a tree canopy, and so by reading the incoming light the seeds can know when to germinate. And the result is a thick stand of fire cherries, loaded with fruit, ready to start the cycle again. Raspberries and blackberries have similar capacities, which is why berry pickers flock to old burn sites.

Fire incidence varies, of course, with drought and forest health. Whenever the soils and accumulated fuels on the forest floor become dry, the risk of fire increases. Stands of insect- and disease-killed trees also make fire more likely. The shifts in precipitation and increases in forest pests and pathogens associated with the climate crisis may spell a change in the fire frequency here, as they have in the American West, and require changes in our approach to forest stewardship.

The Adirondacks continues to be an exceptional living laboratory for understanding forested ecosystems and human relationships within them. There was a time when human-caused fires were a destructive force, with intensity and scale that challenged the ability of the landscape to respond. Lands that a century ago were charred stumps and scraggly aspens in the aftermath of careless logging are today rich mature forests. The land and the people are resilient here in what Bill McKibben calls the "second-chance wilderness." Fire has returned as an occasional creator of biodiversity, and not a destroyer of forests. The fire towers of my childhood are emblems of the role of humans in creating balance between the forces of destruction and renewal.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, who wrote this for our April 2016 issue, is a plant ecologist, James Beard Award–winning writer, SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at the College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse and serves as the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. She is author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, and was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2022.

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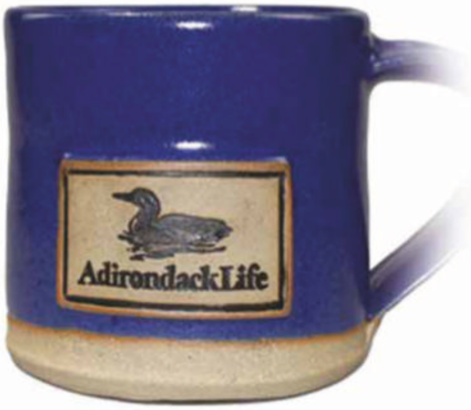

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VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Continued from page 49

ed 73 calls, from snowmobile accidents to stranded hikers. The town's Emergency Medical Services is now fully paid, but the fire is all-volunteer. "I'm not sure what we'd do if we dropped below eight active volunteers," he said. "The state will have to come up with something that makes it easier on people by limiting the training hours. Or we'd have to go to paid."

The adjoining volunteer fire department, in Blue Mountain Lake, is faring better. Blue Mountain Lake is a hamlet in the town of Indian Lake, and the two departments divide up the enormous land area—266 square miles (or half the size of Westchester County).

Chief Greg George in Blue Mountain Lake said the department had doubled the number of its active volunteers since the 1990s, when it reached a low point. Now there are 12 to 15, including three men in their 30s, thanks, he said, to the assertive schmoozing of a member in his 50s. Still, he'd like more, especially since the average age of his volunteers is north of 65. He himself is 76.

Recent incidents included a truck carrying a load of dynamite that veered off the road and landed in a swamp near Lake Durant. Then there was an arson involving a mentally ill hiker who broke into a home, poured whiskey around the living room and lit a match. "The thing to remember here is the distance," George said. "If you get a fire, already there is a lot of time involved in getting to it, especially in the middle of winter. If the alarm goes off, they have to get dressed, scrape the snow off their cars, get to the firehouse and then the scene."

Today's flammable home contents make that timing especially hard. Chief George called the synthetic carpeting, furnishings and objects "solid-state gasoline." It used to be you had 17 minutes to vacate a house after a fire broke out; now it's closer to three. "With today's structure and contents," he said, "the fires go quickly."

Back in the High Peaks, a fire broke out in May inside a wall at the Trail's End Inn, in Keene Valley, after a fireplace brick failed. The turnout was impressive—13 volunteers from Keene Valley

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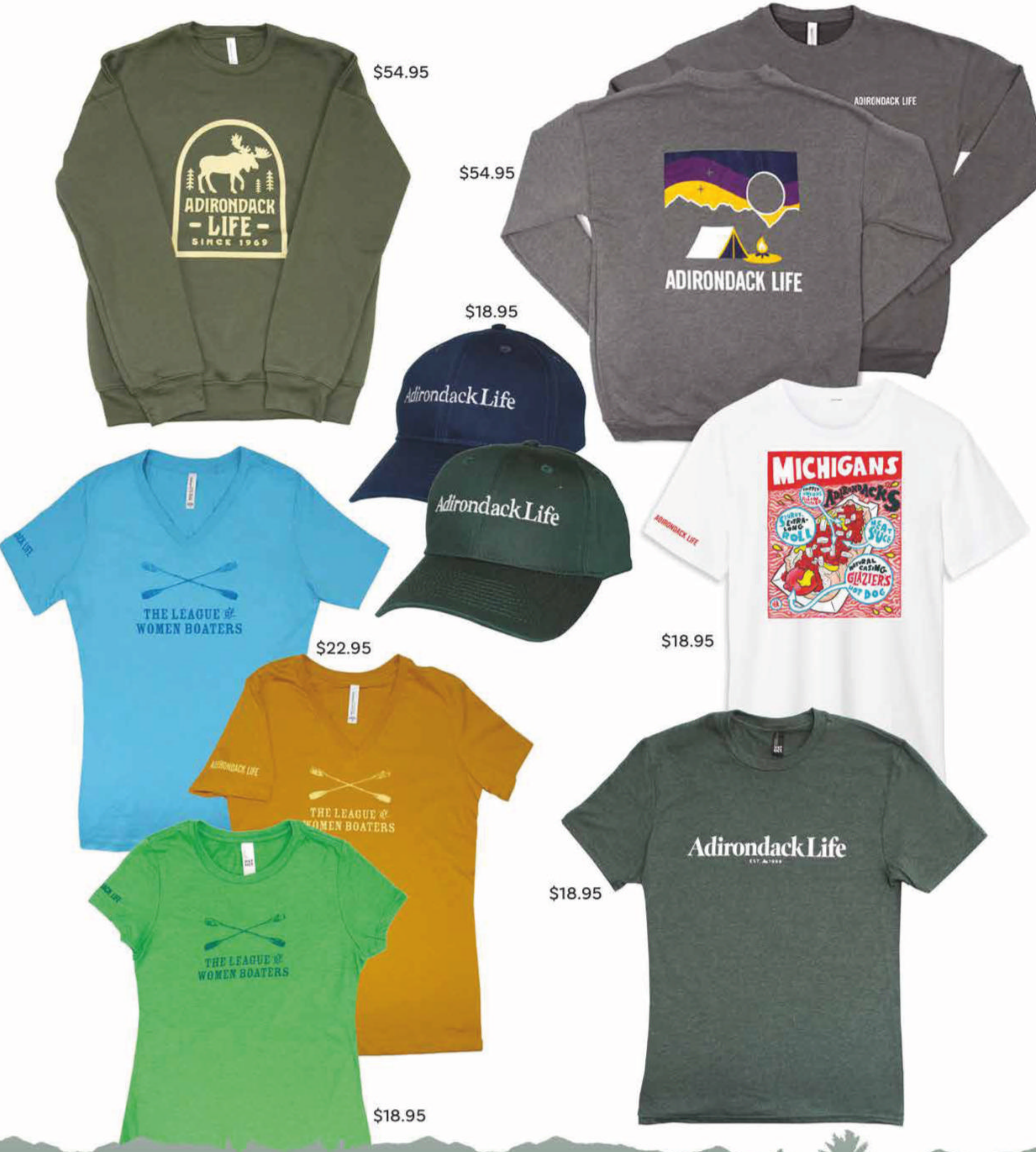
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Fire and a half dozen from Keene. They were on the scene within six minutes, and only one room in the sprawling inn sustained fire damage. “As a chief, you’re never happy,” Hall said. “But we don’t often get the chance to win, and we really enjoy it when it happens.”

One of the responders was Wyatt Martin, 16, who was just voted in as a junior volunteer with Keene Fire. “Once you turn 18 there are no more restrictions, but I helped put things away,” he said.

His commitment is gratifying to more senior firefighters—like his second cousin, Cori-Anne Favro, who is the newly appointed second assistant chief in the Keene department. Favro is looking to the future, including that of her two children, 11-year-old Cooper and nine-year-old Aubrey. “Luckily our department is very family-oriented so they come to the meetings and the trainings,” said Favro, whose husband is also a volunteer. “Cooper has a little set of gear that he loves, which is good because we need another generation to come up through or we’re going to be in big trouble.”

Born and raised in Keene, Favro is herself the granddaughter of a founding member of the Keene Volunteer Fire Department. Because she works remotely, as a project manager for a software engineering firm, she is able to respond to most calls, as both a volunteer firefighter and an EMT. She agreed the training was onerous. “I’m currently refreshing my EMT certification at North Country Community College,” she said. “It is two nights a week from six p.m. to 10. It started on March 20 and we won’t graduate until July 20.”

Still, she said, volunteering for the fire department gives her life meaning. “I’ve always loved feeling like I’m doing something to make someone’s life better,” she explained. “It makes your time here worth living. We see people on their darkest days and it’s rewarding to just be a comfort. It sounds really cheesy, but honestly, it is.” ▲

Lisa Foderaro, a reporter for *The New York Times* for more than 30 years, wrote about peregrine falcons in our June 2022 issue.

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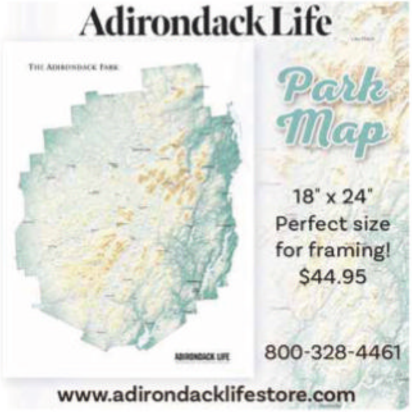
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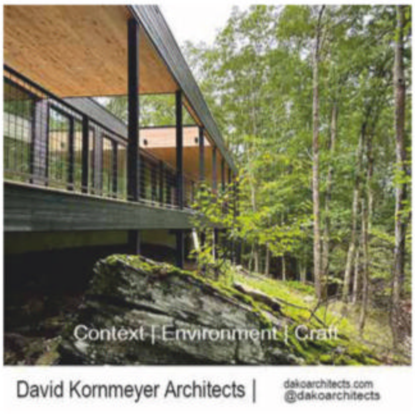
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I had been hiking the Northville-Placid Trail (NPT) for five hours, heading "SoBo"—southbound in NPT parlance—aiming to meet up with friends hiking NoBo. They were on a multi-day excursion; I was braving an overnight, in and out.

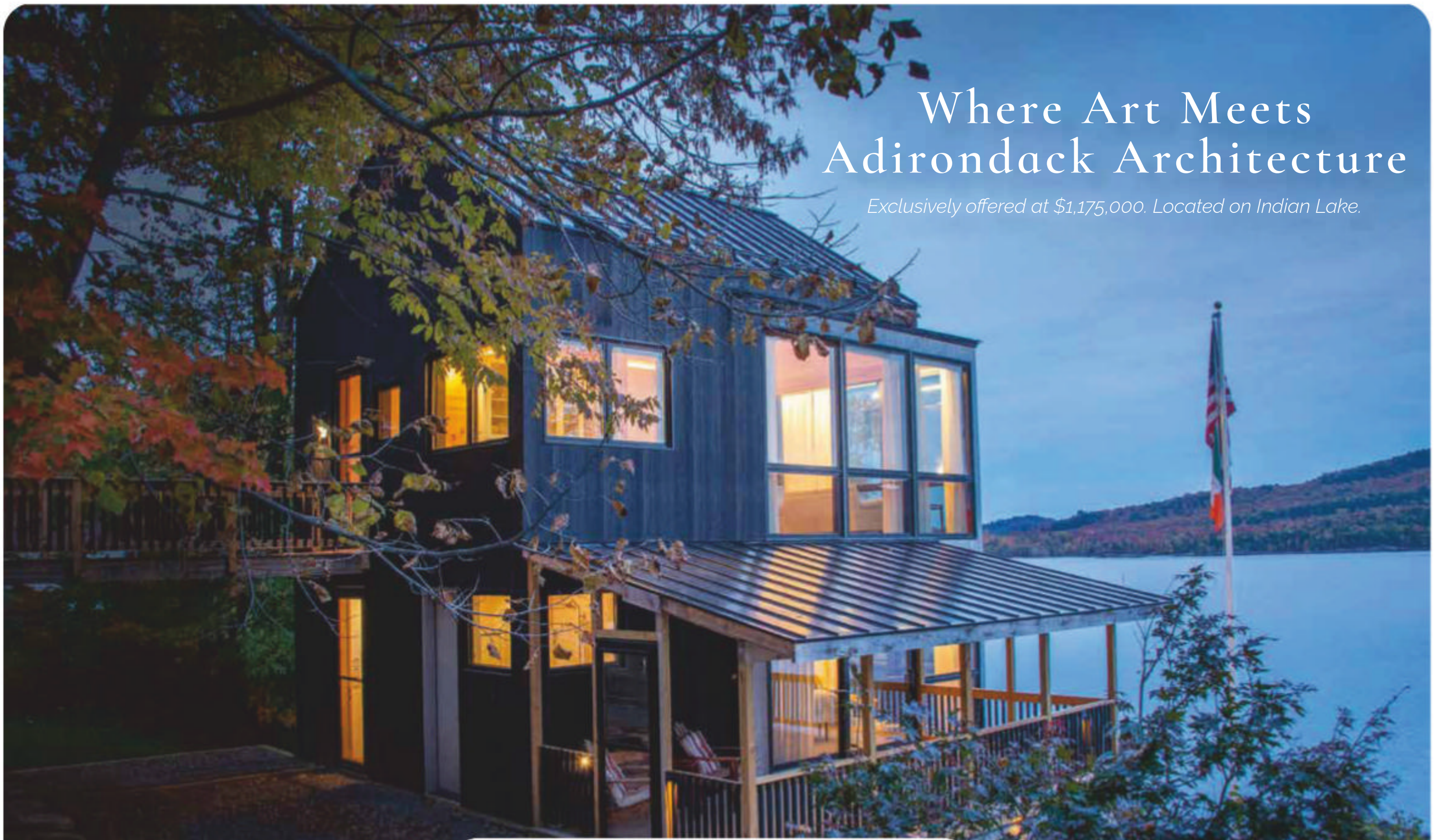
I started from Wakely Dam. Getting to Cedar Lakes would be about 10 miles, so I expected some woodland walking and water views and maybe some humans. One of those, named Collin, appeared about seven miles in. He had seen my people the day before. Perfect. The plan to meet near Cedar Lakes was happening. Hopefully they would make it to lean-to #1, where I'd set up camp.

My one-night stand appeared shortly after six p.m. It was empty, a prize for an overnighter. I dropped my pack and planned a quick run toward lean-to #2, about a mile away, to find my people. But some nearby tent campers stopped by to chat. Sitting for 15 minutes did me in. My mission was aborted. If my people showed up that evening, fine. If not, I'd be in my very own lean-to.

As dark fell, the screams of loons echoed off the water. Awake. Asleep. Awake.

A morning mist blanketed the calm of dawn. By eight a.m. I had regathered my belongings and was ready for my return walk through the woods when my people, heavy packs on their backs, appeared. They'd spent the night at lean-to #2, barely a mile way. We were giddy to see each other and they were amazed that I was there, and that I'd had Cedar Lakes #1 all to myself. So was I.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA



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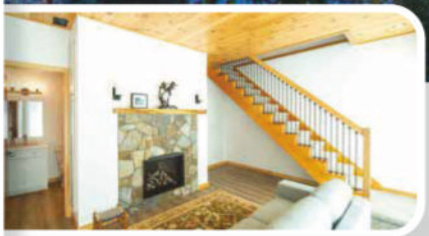

202A LAKESHORE DRIVE, INDIAN LAKE

Perched above the tranquil shores of Indian Lake, this 1,900-square-foot architectural gem is a striking blend of rustic Adirondack charm and Japanese-inspired minimalism. Designed by actor and architect Phil Consalvo, the home harmonizes with its natural surroundings through a pitched roof, robust stone foundation, and burned-wood siding that nods to traditional shou sugi ban. Inside, natural materials—stone, wood, and wrought iron—create a warm and inviting atmosphere, while generous skylights add brightness and modern flair. The luminous "bento box" glass addition at the rear of the home is a stunning centerpiece, offering panoramic views of the lake and mountains beyond.

The layout features one bedroom, 2.5 baths, and a lower-level suite with a full bath that could serve as a second bedroom. Though the home honors the 500-square-foot footprint of the original structure, it cleverly builds upward, maximizing space across three thoughtfully designed levels with the help of a dumbwaiter and smart storage solutions. Outdoors, approximately 1,000 square feet of additional living space await—a covered porch, expansive deck, and boathouse provide the perfect setting for lakeside relaxation. Equal parts serene retreat and architectural statement, this home is a rare opportunity to live artfully in the heart of the Adirondacks.

Contact us today for more
details or to schedule a tour

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